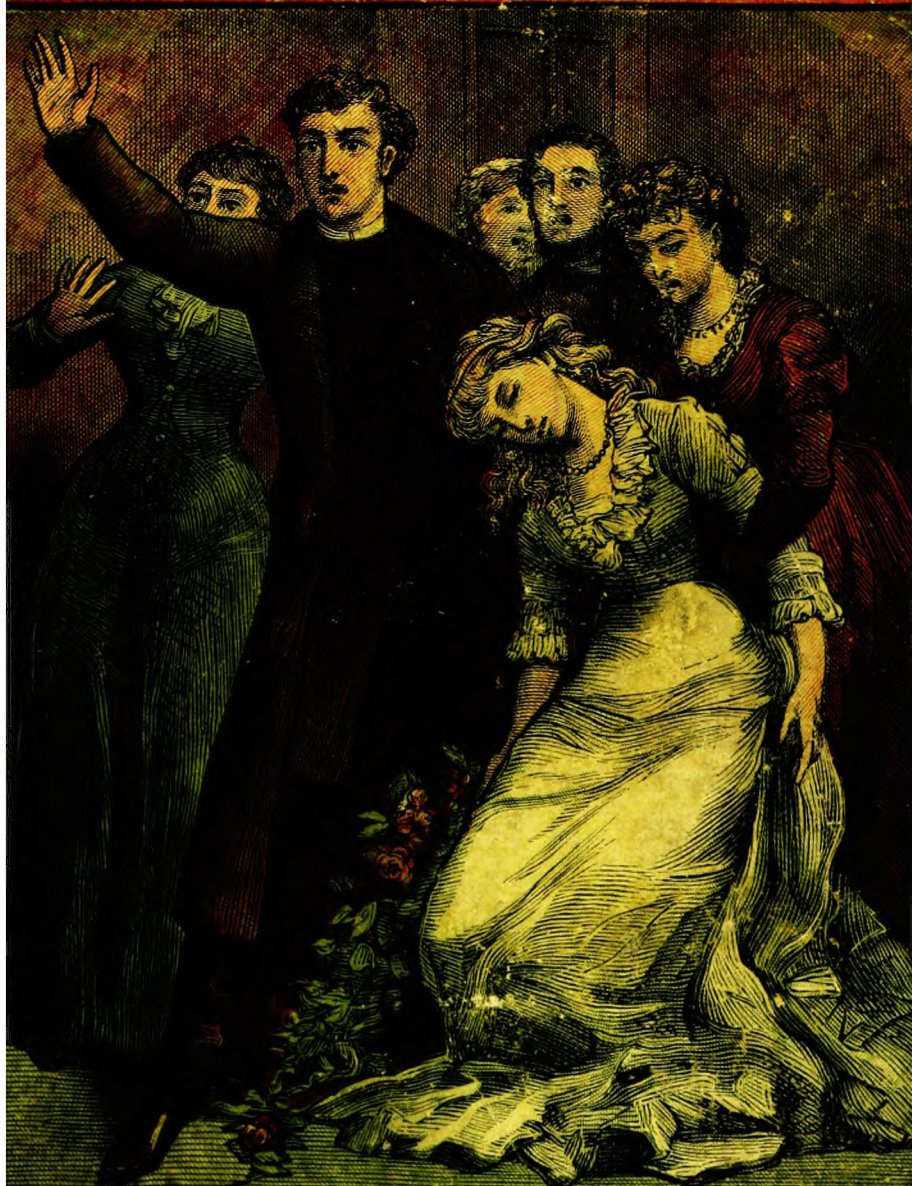


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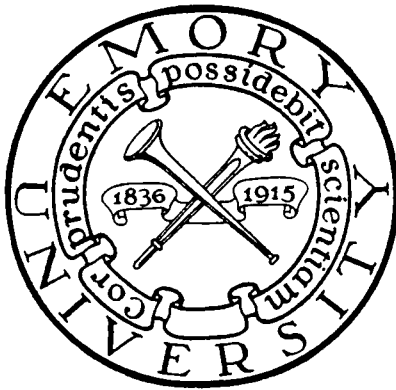
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BY

M. O. W. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD' ETC.

NEW EDITION

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1883

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IN TRUST.



CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

‘MY dear, the case is as plain as noonday ; you must give this man up.’

‘The case is not plain to me, father—at least, not in your sense.’

‘Anne, you are very positive and self-opinionated, but you cannot—it is not possible—set up your judgment against mine on such a point. You, an inexperienced, prejudiced girl, a rustic with no knowledge of the world ! What do you know about the man ? Oh, I allow he is well enough to look at ; he has had the usual amount of education, and so forth ; but what do you *know* about him ? that is what I ask.’

‘Not much, father,’ said Anne, steadily ; ‘but I know *him*.’

‘Stuff ! you, a girl not much over twenty, know a *man* ! Does he tell you, do you suppose, all the adventures of his life ? Does he confess his sins to you ? A young fellow that has been trained at a public school, that has been at the university, that has knocked about the world—is he going to confide all that to *you* ? He would be unworthy the name of gentleman if he did.’

‘Would he not be more unworthy the name of gentleman if he had done things which he could not confide to me?’ said Anne; then reddening suddenly, she added, ‘And even if it were so, father, if in those days he had done things unfit for my ears, let him be silent; I will not ask any questions: I know what he is now.’

‘Oh, stuff, I tell you! stuff and nonsense, child! You know what he is *now*! Yes, what he is when his best coat is on, when he is going to church with his hymn-book in his pocket and you on his arm; that is a very edifying aspect of him; but if you think that is all, or nearly all——’

Anne was silent. It was not that she was convinced, but that her indignation took words from her. She could not make any reply to such calumnies; and this was troublesome to her father, who preferred an argument to a distinct and unsupported statement. He looked at her for a moment, baffled, feeling himself cut short in the full flow of utterance—then picked up the thread again, and resumed:

‘You would be a fool to trust in any man in that unguarded way: and above all in a lawyer. They are all rogues; it is in them. When did you ever hear a good word spoken for that class of men? I will not consent to any such nonsense: and if you act without my consent, you know the consequence. I will not give your mother’s money to maintain in luxury a man who is—who will be—never mind! You shall not have it. I will give it to Rose, as I have the power.’

‘You would not be so unjust,’ said Anne.

‘Unjust! I will do it if you defy me in this way. Rose has always been a better child to me than you have been; and she shall have the money if you don’t mind.’

Whoever had looked at Anne Mountford then would not have given much for the chance of her

submission. She said nothing, but her upper lip shut down upon the lower with an unrelenting, immovable determination. She would not even add a word to her protest against the possibility of the injustice with which she had been threatened. She was too proud to repeat herself; she stood still, unbending, betraying no impatience, ready to receive with calmness everything that might be said to her, but firm as the house upon its foundations, or the hills that are called everlasting. Her father knew something of the character of his eldest child; he knew very well that no small argument would move her, but perhaps he was not aware how far beyond his power she was. He looked at her, however, with a passionate annoyance very different from her calm, and with something vindictive and almost spiteful in his reddish-grey eyes. Most likely he had felt himself dashed against the wall of her strong will before now, and had been exasperated by the calm force of opposition which he could make no head against.

‘You hear what I say,’ he repeated roughly; ‘if you insist, I shall exercise the right your mother gave me; I shall alter my will: and the fortune which is no doubt your chief attraction in this man’s eyes—the fortune he has been calculating upon—I will give to Rose. You hear what I say?’

‘Yes,’ said Anne. She bowed her head gravely; no doubt that she understood him, and equally no doubt that what he said had moved her as much as a shower of rain might have done, and that she was fully determined to take her own way.

‘On your own head be it then,’ he cried.

She bowed again, and after waiting for a moment to see if he had anything further to say to her, went quietly out of the room. It was in the library of a country house that this interview had taken place—the commonplace business room of a country gentleman of no very great pretensions. The walls were lined

with bookcases in which there was a tolerable collection of books, but yet they did not tell for much in the place. They were furniture like the curtains, which were rather shabby, and the old Turkey carpet—most respectable furniture, yet a little neglected, wanting renewal. Mr. Mountford's writing-table was laden with papers; he had plenty of business to transact, though not of a strictly intellectual kind. He was an old man, still handsome in his age, with picturesque snow-white hair in masses, clearly-cut, fine features, and keen eyes of that reddish hazel which betokens temper. Those eyes constantly burned under the somewhat projecting eyebrows. They threw a sort of angry lurid light on his face. The name of the house was Mount; it had been in the Mountford family for many generations; but it was not a beautiful and dignified house any more than he was a fine old English gentleman. Both the place and the man had traditional rights to popular respect, but neither man nor place had enforced this claim by any individual beauty or excellence. There was no doubt as to the right of the Mountfords to be ranked among the gentry of the district, as good as the best, in so far that the family had been settled there for centuries; but they were of that curiously commonplace strain which is prevalent enough among the smaller gentry, without any splendour of wealth to dazzle the beholder, and which rouses in the mind of the spectator a wonder as to what it is that makes the squire superior to his neighbours. The Mountfords from father to son had got on through the world without any particular harm or good, uninteresting, ordinary people, respectable enough, yet not even very respectable. They were not rich, they were not able; they had nothing in themselves to distinguish them from the rest of the world; yet wherever the name of Mountford appeared, throughout all the

southern counties at least, the claims of its possessor to gentility were founded on his relationship to the Mountfords of Mount. Most curious of all the triumphs of the aristocratical principle! Or rather perhaps it is the more human principle of continuance which is the foundation of this prejudice to which we are all more or less subject. A family which has lasted, which has had obstinacy enough to cling to its bit of soil, to its old house, must have something in it worth respect. This principle, however, tells in favour of the respectable shopkeeper quite as much as the squire, but it does not tell in the same way. The Mountfords felt themselves of an entirely different order from the shopkeeper—why, heaven knows! but their estimate was accepted by all the world.

Mount had the distinction of being entailed; it was not a large estate nor a valuable one, and it had been deeply mortgaged when the present Mr. Mountford, St. John by name, came of age. But he had married an heiress, who had liberated his acres and added greatly to his social importance. The first Mrs. Mountford had died early, leaving only one daughter, and at the same time her entire fortune in the hands of her husband, to do with it what he pleased. These were the days when public opinion was very unanimous as to the impropriety and unnecessariness of female rights of any kind, and everybody applauded Mrs. Mountford for resisting all conditions, and putting herself and her child unreservedly in her husband's hands. He had re-married two years after her death, but unfortunately had succeeded in obtaining only another girl from unpropitious fate. His first wife's daughter was Anne, universally considered as the natural heiress of the considerable fortune which, after clearing the estate, had remained of her mother's money, and which her father had kept scrupulously 'in a napkin,' like the churl in the

parable, neither increasing nor diminishing the store. The other daughter was Rose. Such was the household at Mount in the days when this history begins. The reigning Mrs. Mountford was a good sort of easy woman who did not count for much. She was one of the Codringtons of Carrisford—a ‘very good family’ of the same class as the Mountfords. Nothing could be better than the connections on both sides—or duller. But the girls were different. It is very hard to say why the girls should have been different—perhaps because the present new wave of life has distinctly affected the girls more than any other class of society. At all events, the point was indisputable. Anne perhaps might have taken after her mother, who was of an entirely new stock, not a kind which had ever before been ingrafted on the steady-going family tree. She had come out of a race partly mercantile, partly diplomatic; her grandfather had been Spanish; it was even suspected that one of her ancestors had been a Jew. All kinds of out-of-the-way sources had furnished the blood which had been destined to mix with the slow current in the Mountford veins; and probably Anne had inherited certain bizarre qualities from this jumble. But Rose had no such mixed antecedents. There was not a drop of blood in her veins that did not belong to the county, and it was difficult to see how she could have ‘taken after’ her sister Anne, as was sometimes suggested, in respect to peculiarities which had come to Anne from her mother; but if she did not take after Anne, who *did* she take after, as Mrs. Mountford often demanded?

Rose was now eighteen and Anne just over one-and-twenty. They were considered in the neighbourhood to be attractive girls. A household possessing two such daughters is naturally supposed to have all the elements of brightness within it; and perhaps if

there had been brothers the girls would have taken their natural place as harmonisers and peacemakers. But there were no brothers, and the girls embodied all the confusing and disturbing influences natural to boys in their own persons, with certain difficulties appropriate to their natural character. It is true they did not get into scrapes or into debt; they were not expelled from school or 'sent down' from College. Duns did not follow them to the paternal door, or roistering companions break the family peace. But yet Anne and Rose contrived to give as much trouble to Mr. and Mrs. Mountford as if they had been Jack and Tom. These good people had lived for about a dozen years in their rural mansion like the cabbages in the kitchen garden. Nothing had disturbed them. There had been no call upon their reasoning faculties, no strain upon their affections: everything had gone on quite tranquilly and comfortably, with that quiet persistence of well-being which makes trouble seem impossible. They had even said to themselves with sighs, that to have only girls was after all good for something. They could not be tormented as others were, or even as the rector, one of whose boys had gone 'to the bad.' The thing which had been was that which should be. The shocks, the discoveries, the commotions, which the restless elements involved in male youth bring with them, could not trouble their quiet existence. So they consoled themselves, although not without a sigh.

Alas, good people! they had reckoned without their girls. The first storm that arose in the house was when Anne suddenly discovered that her governess never detected her false notes when she played, and passed the mistakes which she made, on purpose to test her, in her grammar. 'I want some one who can teach me,' the girl said. She was only fifteen, but she had already made a great deal more use of

that pernicious faculty of reading which works so much mischief in the world than Mrs. Mountford approved. Someone who could teach her! That meant a lady at seventy-five or a hundred pounds a year, instead of thirty-five, which was what they had hitherto given. Mrs. Mountford nearly cried over this most unreasonable demand. Miss Montessor was very nice. She was of a family which had seen better days, and she was fully conscious of her good fortune in having gained an entry into a county family. After all, what did it matter about false notes or mistakes in grammar? It was a ladylike person that was everything. But when Rose too declared in her little treble that she wanted somebody who could teach her, Miss Montessor had to go; and the troubles that followed! To do them justice, the Squire and his wife did their very best to satisfy these unreasonable young people. They got a German governess with all kinds of certificates, who taught Rose to say 'pon chour;' they got a French lady, who commended herself to the best feelings of Mrs. Mountford's nature by making her up the sweetest cap, but who taught the girls that Charles I. was all but rescued from the scaffold by the generous exertions of a Gascon gentleman of the name of D'Artagnan and three friends who were devoted to him. Mrs. Mountford herself was much pleased with this information, but Anne and her father were of a different opinion. However, it would be too long to follow them minutely through all these troubles. At seventeen Anne wanted Greek and to 'go in for' examinations—which gave a still more complete blow to the prejudices of the house. 'The same as a young man!' It was improper in the highest degree, almost wicked; Mrs. Mountford did not like to think of it. It seemed to her, as to some of our ablest critics, that nothing but illicit longings after evil could make a girl wish to pass

examinations and acquire knowledge. She must want to read the naughty books which are written in Greek and Latin, and which deprave the minds of young men, the good woman thought. As for the certificates and honours, they might be all very well for the governesses of whom Mrs. Mountford had such melancholy experience; but a young lady of a county family, what did she want with them? They would be things to be ashamed, not proud of. And on this point Anne was vanquished. She was allowed to learn Greek with many forebodings, but not to be examined in her knowledge. However, this decision was chiefly intended to prevent Rose from following her sister, as she always did; for to refuse Girton to Rose would have been more difficult than to neglect Anne's entreaties. For, though Anne was the eldest sister, it was Rose who was the princess royal and reigned over the whole demesne.

This desire of the higher education on the part of Rose, who still said 'pon chour,' and was not at all certain that two and two always make four, would have been enough to keep the house in commotion if there had not occurred just then one of the family troubles appropriate to girls after so many that could not be called feminine. It has already been said that the rector of the parish had a son who had 'gone to the bad.' He had two other sons, rocks ahead for the young ladies at Mount. Indeed these two young men were such obvious dangers that Mrs. Mountford had taken precautions against them while Rose was still in her cradle. One was a curate, his father's probable successor; but as the living was in Mr. Mountford's hands, and it was always possible that someone else might be preferred to Charley, some Mountford connection who had a nearer claim, that prospect did not count for much. The other was nothing at

all, a young man at Oxford, not yet launched upon life. But fortunately these young men, though very familiar in the house, were not handsome nor dangerously attractive, and this peril is one which must always be encountered in the country, even by people of much higher pretensions than the Mountfords. The first trouble, however, did not come from this obvious quarter, though it came through there. It was not one of the Ashleys; but it was a person still less satisfactory. One of the curate's friends arrived suddenly on a visit in the late summer—a young Mr. Douglas, a barrister, which sounds well enough; but not one of the Douglasses who have ever been heard of. They did not find this out for some time, imagining fondly that he belonged, at a distance perhaps, to the Morton family, or to the house of Queensberry, or at least to Douglasses in Scotland, of whom it could be said that they were of Lanarkshire or Selkirkshire or some other county. Indeed, it was not until the whole household was thrown into commotion by a morning call from Mr. Douglas, who asked for Mr. Mountford, and boldly demanded from him the hand of Anne, that it burst upon them that he was a Douglas of nowhere at all. He had been very well educated, and he was at the bar; but when he was asked what branch of the Douglasses he belonged to, he answered 'None,' with a smile. 'I have no relations,' he said. Relations can be dispensed with. There is no harm in being without them; but a family was indispensable, and he belonged to nobody. It was just like Anne, however, not to care. She did not in the least care, nor did she see any harm in her lover's countyless condition. And when Mr. Mountford politely declined the honour of an alliance with this Mr. Douglas of nowhere at all, she did not hesitate to say that she entirely disagreed with her father. This was the state in which

things were at the time of the interview I have recorded. Mr. Mountford was determined, and so was his daughter. This struggle of wills had taken place before, but never before had it gone so far. In former cases Anne had given in, or she had been given in to, the one as much as the other. But now there was no yielding on one side or the other. The father had declared himself inexorable; the daughter had said little, but her countenance had said much. And the threat with which he wound up had introduced an entirely new element into the discussion. What was to come of it? But that was what at this moment nobody could venture to say.

CHAPTER II.

THE REST OF THE FAMILY.

THE old house of Mount was a commodious but ugly house. It was not even so old as it ought to have been. Only in one corner were there any picturesque remains of antiquity, and that was in the back of the house, and did not show. The only thing in its favour was that it had once been a much larger place than it was now, and a detached bit of lime avenue—very fine trees, forming in the summer two lovely walls of tender shade—was supposed in the traditions of the place to indicate where once the chief entrance and the best part of the mansion had been. At the foot of the terrace on which these trees stood, and at a considerably lower altitude, was the flower-garden, very formally laid out, and lying along the side of the house, which was of dull brick with very flat windows, and might almost have been a factory, so uninteresting was it; but the lawns that spread around were green and smooth as velvet, and the park, though not large,

was full of fine trees. Mr. Mountford's room was in the back of the house, and Anne had to go from one end to another to reach the common morning-room of the family, which was the hall. This had been nothing but a mere passage in former days, though it was square and not badly proportioned; but the modern taste for antiquity had worked a great change in this once commonplace vestibule. It had been furnished with those remains which are always to be found about an old house, relics of past generations, curtains which had been rejected as too dingy for wear a hundred years ago, but now were found to be the perfection of tone and taste—old folding screens, and chairs and tables dismissed as too clumsy or too old-fashioned for the sitting-rooms of the family. All these together made a room which strangers called picturesque, but which old neighbours regarded with contempt, as a thing of shreds and patches. There was but one huge window reaching from the ceiling almost to the floor, and an equally large mantelpiece almost matching the window and opposite to it. The large round table before the fire was covered with an old Indian shawl carefully darned and mended for this use—a use which had revolted all the old ladies in the county—and with books, magazines, and newspapers, carefully arranged by old Saymore, the butler, in a kind of pattern; for Saymore followed his young ladies, and took a great interest in everything that was artistic. A work-table in one corner overflowed with crewels; in another stood an easel. The place was full of the occupations and fancies of the two girls who had fashioned it into its present shape. While Anne was having the conversation with her father which has been recorded, Mrs. Mountford and Rose were pursuing their different employments in this room. Mrs. Mountford was a contradiction to everything about her. She wore ribbons of the most pronounced

brightness, dresses of the old gay colours; and did worsted work. She was a round plump woman, with rosy cheeks and a smiling mouth; but she was not quite so innocent and easy as her looks indicated. She could stand very fast indeed where any point of interest was concerned—and she was doubly immovable in consequence of the fact that her interests were not her own but those of Rose, and therefore she could not be made to feel guilty in respect to them. She had a little table of her own in the midst of all the properties—which she called rubbish—accumulated by the girls, and there pursued her placid way week after week and year after year, working, as if she had been born a century earlier, groups of roses and geraniums for cushions and footstools, and strips of many coloured work for curtains and rugs. Had she been permitted to have her will, the house would have been furnished with these from garret to basement; but as Rose was ‘artistic,’ poor Mrs. Mountford’s Berlin wools were rarely made any use of. They were given away as presents, or disposed of at bazaars. There was a closet in her own room which was full of them, and a happy woman was she when any girl of her acquaintance married, or a fancy fair was announced for any charitable object, which reduced her stores. A workbasket full of the most brilliant wools in the tidiest bundles, a German pattern printed in squares, a little pile of tradesmen’s books in red covers, and a small brown basket full of keys, were the signs of her little settlement in the hall. These possessions stood upon a small table with three legs, decorated with a broad band of Mrs. Mountford’s work. She had said boldly that if she were not permitted to put her own work upon her own table, she did not know what the world would come to. And upon hearing this protest Anne had interfered. Anne was the only person who ever interfered to save her

stepmother from the tyranny exercised over her by her own child; but Mrs. Mountford was not grateful enough to return this service by taking Anne's part.

Rose was the presiding spirit of the hall. Though she did not originate anything, but followed her sister's lead, yet she carried out all the suggestions that ever glanced across the surface of Anne's mind with an energy which often ended in making the elder sister somewhat ashamed of her initiative. Anne's fancies became stereotyped in Rose's execution, and nothing but a new idea from the elder changed the current of the younger girl's enthusiasm. When Anne took to ornamental design, Rose painted all the panels of the doors and window shutters, and even had begun a pattern of sunflowers round the drawing-room (which had been newly decorated with a dado and three kinds of wall-papers), when Anne fortunately took to sketching from nature, and saved the walls by directing her sister's thoughts in another direction. The easel remained a substantial proof of these studies, but a new impulse had changed the aspect of affairs. In the course of the sketching it had been discovered that some of the cottages on the estate were in the most wretched condition, and Anne, with the instinct of a budding squire and philanthropist united, had set to work upon plans for new houses. The consequence of which was that Rose, with compasses and rulers and a box of freshly-cut pencils, was deep in the question of sculleries and wash-houses, marking all the measurements upon the plan, with her whole heart in the work.

'Anne is a long time with papa,' said Mrs. Mountford; 'I suppose she is trying to talk him over; she might just as well try to move the house. You girls never will understand that it is of no use arguing with papa.'

'One never can help thinking that reason must

prevail,' said Rose, without raising her head, 'at the end.'

'Reason!' said Mrs. Mountford, lifting her hands and her eyebrows; 'but, even if it were always reason, what would that matter? As for Anne, she has a great deal too much self-confidence; she always thinks she is right.'

'And so she is—almost always,' said Rose, very busy with her measuring. 'Do you happen to remember, mamma, whether it is ninety feet or a hundred that the pigsty must be off the house?'

'What should I know about pigsties? I am sure I often wonder papa takes all the trouble he does when you are both so headstrong. Fortunately for him he has me to talk to where *you* are concerned; but Anne!—oh, here she is—don't say anything, she may not like to have it talked about. So here you are at last, Anne; we thought you were never coming. But I wish I had someone to do my work for me when I am busy about something else, as Rose does for you. She never takes so much trouble on my account.'

'It is not her work,' said Rose, offended, 'it is my own. Mayn't I have something now and then that is my own? How many yards, Anne, do you remember, must the pigsty be off the house?'

Anne did not remember this important piece of knowledge. 'But,' she said, 'it is in that book of specifications. It is dry to read, but it is a very good book; you should have it on the table to refer to. You have made the living room too large in comparison with the rest of the house.'

'Because they are poor,' said Rose, indignantly, 'is that to say that they are to have nothing pretty in their lives?'

'But there must be a good scullery,' said Anne. She stood with a very grave face behind her sister, looking over her shoulder at the drawings spread out

on the table. Whether it was the importance of the scullery, or of the other matters concerning her own happiness which she had in her head, it is certain that Anne's countenance was very serious. The very tone of her voice proved to those who knew her so well that her mood was graver than usual. At other times the importance of the scullery would have brought a tone of laughter, an accent of fun into her voice; but her gravity was now quite real and unbroken by any lighter sentiment. She was taller than her sister, and of a different order altogether. Anne was rather pale than otherwise, with but a slight evanescent colour now and then; her features good, her face oval, her eyes dark grey, large and lucid, and with long eyelashes curling upwards. But Rose, though she had all that *beauté de diable* which is the privilege of youth, was, like her mother, round and rosy, though her pretty little face and figure had not the solidity, nor her complexion the set and rigid tone which placid middle age acquires. The one face over the other contrasted pleasantly; the elder serious, as if nothing in heaven or earth could ever make her smile again; the younger bent with momentary gravity and importance over her work. But they had no air of belonging to each other. Nothing but an accident could have linked together two beings so little resembling. The accident was Mr. Mountford, whom neither of them was at all like. They were not Mountfords at all, as everybody in the neighbourhood allowed. They took after their mothers, not the one and indivisible head of the family; but that did not really matter, for these two girls, like their mothers, were no more than accidents in the house.

The ancient estate was entailed, and knew nothing of such slight things as girls. When their father died they would have to give up Mount and go away from it. It was true that there still would

be a great deal of land in the county belonging to one of them at least, for Mr. Mountford had not been able to resist the temptation of buying and enlarging his estate at the time when he married his first wife, and thought of no such misfortune as that of leaving only a couple of girls behind him. A long life and boys to succeed him were as certainties in his thoughts when he bought all the lands about Charwood and the estate of Lower Lilford. There they lay now, embracing Mount on every side, Mount which must go to Heathcote Mountford, the head of the *other* family. It was grievous, but it could not be helped. And the girls were not Mountfords, either the one or the other. They betrayed, shall we say, an inherent resentment against the law of entail and all its harsh consequences, by resembling their mothers, and declining to be like the race which thus callously cast them forth.

Mrs. Mountford looked at them with very watchful eyes. She knew what it was which had made her husband send for his eldest daughter into his study after breakfast. It was a circumstance which often galled Anne, a high-spirited girl, that her stepmother should be in the secret of all her personal concerns; but still man and wife are one, and it could not be helped. This fact, however, that everything was known about her, whether she would or not, shut her lips and her heart. Why should she be confidential and open herself to their inspection when they knew it all beforehand without her? This stopped all inclination to confide, and had its effect, no doubt, as all repression has, on Anne's character. Her heart was in a turmoil now, aching with anger and annoyance, and disappointment, and a sense of wrong. But the only effect of this was to make her more serious than ever. In such a mood to win a smile from her, to strike her sense of humour, which was lively, or to touch her heart, which was tender, was to open

the floodgates, and the girl resented and avoided this risk with all the force of her nature. And, truth to tell, there was little power, either in Mrs. Mountford or her daughter, to undo the bonds with which Anne had bound herself. It was seldom that they appealed to her feelings, and when they made her laugh it was not in sympathy, but derision—an unamiable and unsatisfactory kind of laughter. Therefore it happened now that they knew she was in trouble, and watched her keenly to see the traces of it; and she knew they knew, and sternly repressed any symptom by which they might divine how much moved she was.

‘You build your cottages your way,’ cried Rose, ‘and I will build mine in mine. Papa will let me have my choice as well as you, and just see which will be liked best.’

‘If Heathcote should have to be consulted,’ said Anne, ‘it will be the cheapest that he will like best.’

‘Anne! I shouldn’t have thought that even you could be so unfeeling. To remind us that dear papa—’ cried Mrs. Mountford; ‘dear papa! Do not speak of his life in that indifferent way, at least before Rose.’

‘Oh, it would not matter,’ said Rose, calmly, ‘whatever happens; for they are for the Lilford houses on our very own land. Heathcote hasn’t anything to do with them.’

‘Anne might say, “Nor you either,” my Rosie,’ said her mother; ‘for everybody knows that you are cut off out of it in every way. Oh, I don’t find any fault. I knew it when I married, and you have known it all your life. It is rather hard, however, everything turning out against us, you and me, my pet; part of the property going away altogether to a distant cousin, and the rest all tied up because one of you is to be made an eldest son.’

‘Mamma!’ said Rose, petulantly, giving a quick glance up at her mother, and shrugging her shoulders with the superiority of youth, as who would say, ‘Why speak of things you don’t understand?’ Then she closed her compasses and put down her pencil. ‘Are we to have a game this afternoon?’ she said: ‘I mean, Anne, are you going to play? Charley and Willie are sure to come, but if you go off as usual, it will be no good, for three can’t play.’

The colour came in a flood over Anne’s pale face. ‘Mamma plays better than I do,’ she said. ‘I have a headache. I don’t think I shall do anything this afternoon.’

‘Will Mr. Douglas have a headache too?’ said Rose; ‘he generally has when you have. It is not much fun,’ she added, with a little virtuous indignation, ‘for Charley and Willie to play with mamma.’

Mrs. Mountford showed no resentment at this frank speech. ‘No,’ she said, ‘it is not much fun for Charley and Willie. I don’t think it has been much fun for them since Mr. Douglas came. Anne likes his talk; he is a very fine talker. It is more interesting to listen to him than to play.’

‘Sometimes it is,’ said Anne gravely, though with another blush; and then the two others laughed.

‘My dear, you bring it on yourself; if we are not to have your confidence, we must have our laugh. We have eyes in our head as well as other people—or, at least, I have eyes in my head,’ said the mother. Anne could not but acknowledge that there was reason in what she said, but it was not said in a way to soften the wounded and angry girl.

‘I do not ask you not to laugh,’ she said.

‘You look more like crying,’ said Rose; and she got up and threw her arms suddenly about her sister, being an impulsive little person whose sympathies

were not to be calculated upon. 'What is it, dear? tell *me*,' she cried, with her soft lips upon her sister's cheek.

Anne's heart swelled as if it would burst out of her breast. There are states of mind in which everything can be borne but sympathy. The gates so hastily rolled to and pushed close began to open. The tears came to her eyes. But then she remembered that the threat her father had made was not one to be confided to them.

'Never mind. I have been talking to my father, and he and I don't see things in the same light. We don't always—one can't help that,' said Anne, in a subdued voice.

'Come up to my room,' said Rosè in her ear. 'Never mind mamma—oh, come up to my room, Anne darling, and tell me all about it! I never was anyone's confidant before.'

But this was not a process which Anne, shy with a fervour of feeling more profound than Rose could understand, or she herself express, felt at all disposed to go through. She put her younger sister gently aside, and brought her plans too to the table. 'We had better settle about the pigsties,' she said, with a little relaxation of her gravity. She laughed in spite of herself. 'It is a safe subject. Show me, Rosie, what you have done.'

Rose was still fresh to this pursuit, and easily recalled to it, so she produced her drawings with little hesitation, and after a while forgot the more interesting matter. They sat with their heads together over the plans, while Mrs. Mountford pursued her worsted work. A moralist might have found in the innocent-seeming group all that inscrutableness of human nature which it is so easy to remark and so impossible to fathom. Rose, it was true, had not much in her little mind except the cottages, and the hope of producing a plan which

should be approved as the best, having in her heart a childish desire to surpass Anne, which by no means diminished her faithful allegiance to her as the origin of all impulses and setter of every fashion. But Anne's heart, underneath the fresh crispness of her muslin dress, and the apparent interest with which she pursued her work, and discussed her sculleries, was beating high with much confused and painful emotion. Indignation and a sense of wrong, mingled with a certain contempt even for the threat which had wounded her as an empty menace, never to be carried out—a false and fictitious weapon meant for no end but that of giving her pain; and, on the other hand, the disappointment of her hopes, and a certainty of severance from the love which had been a revelation to her of so much in heaven and earth of which she was unaware before—filled her being. She would not give him up, but she would be parted from him. He would go away, and any intercourse they might hereafter keep up must be maintained in resistance to the authority under which she had lived all her life. Thus what she had supposed to be the crown and glory of existence was summarily turned into bitterness and wrong. She was turning it over and over in her mind, while she sat there steadily comparing her measurements with those of her sister, and wondering how long she must go on with this in order to confound her stepmother's suspicions, and prove that she was neither discouraged nor rendered unhappy by what had happened. Naturally, in her inexperience, Anne gave great importance to this feat of baffling her stepmother's observation, and looking 'just as usual:' and naturally, also, she failed altogether in the attempt. Mrs. Mountford was an experienced woman. She knew what it meant when a girl looked too much as if nothing had happened. And she watched with great vigilance, partly by simple instinct, partly

with a slight sense of gratification, that the elder daughter, who was so much more important than her own child, should feel that she was mortal. It was not any active malevolence that was in Mrs. Mountford's mind. She would have been horrified had it been suggested to her that she wished Anne any harm. She wished her no harm; but only that she might feel after all that life was not one triumph and scene of unruffled success and blessedness—which is the best moral discipline for everybody, as is well known.

CHAPTER III.

THE 'GAME.'

THE name of the parish in which Mount was the principal house was Moniton, by some supposed to be a corruption of Mount-ton, the village being situated on the side of a circular hill looking more like a military mound than a natural object, which gave the name alike to the property and the district. Mount Hill, as it was called with unnecessary amplification, was just outside the park gates, and at its foot lay the Rectory, the nearest neighbouring house with which the Mountfords could exchange civilities. When one comes to think of it, the very existence of such ecclesiastical houses close by the mansions of the English gentry and nobility is a standing menace and danger to that nobler and more elevated class—now that the family living is no longer a natural provision for a younger son. The greatest grandee in the land has to receive the clergyman's family as equals, whatever may be his private opinion on the subject; they are ladies and gentlemen, however poor they may be, or little eligible to be introduced into closer connection with

members of the aristocracy, titled or otherwise; and, as a matter of fact, they have to be so received, whence great trouble sometimes arises, as everybody knows. The young people at the Hall and the parsonage grow up together, they meet continually, and join in all each other's amusements, and if they determine to spend their lives together afterwards, notwithstanding all those social differences which are politely ignored in society, until the moment comes when they must be brought into prominence, who can wonder at it? The wonder is that on the whole so little harm occurs. The young Ashleys were the nearest neighbours of the Mountford girls. They called each other by their Christian names; they furnished each other with most of their amusements. Had the boys not been ready to their call for any scheme of pleasure or use, the girls would have felt themselves aggrieved. But if Charley or Willie had fallen in love with Anne or Rose, the whole social economy would have been shaken by it, and no earthquake would have made a greater commotion. Such catastrophes are constantly happening to the confusion of one district after another all over the country; but who can do anything to prevent it? That it had not happened (openly) in the present case was due to no exceptional philosophy or precaution on any side. And the chance which had made Mr. Cosmo Douglas speak first instead of his friend, the curate, was in no way a fortunate one, except in so far, indeed, that, though it produced great pain and sorrow, it, at least, preserved peace between the two families. The Rector was as much offended, as indignant as Mr. Mountford could be, at the audacity of his son's friend. A stranger, a chance visitor, an intruder in the parish, he, at least, had no vested rights.

The facts of the case were as yet, however, but imperfectly known. Douglas had not gone away.

though it was known that his interview with Mr. Mountford had not been a successful one; but that was no reason why the Ashleys should not stroll up to Mount on this summer afternoon, as was their very general practice. There was always some business to talk about—something about the schools, or the savings bank, or other parochial affairs; and both of them were well aware that without them ‘a game’ was all but impossible.

‘Do you feel up to it, old fellow?’ Willie said to Charley, who was the curate. The elder brother did not make any distinct reply. He said, ‘There’s Douglas to be thought of,’ with a somewhat lugubrious glance behind him where that conquering hero lay on the grass idly puffing his cigar.

‘Confound Douglas!’ said the younger brother, who was a secular person and free to speak his mind. Charley Ashley replied only with a stifled sigh. He might not himself have had the courage to lay his curacy and his hopes at Anne’s feet, at least for a long time to come, but it was not to be expected that he could look with pleasure on the man who had rushed in where he feared to tread, his supplanter, the Jacob who had pushed him out of his path. But yet he could not help in a certain sense admiring his friend’s valour. He could not help talking of it as they took their way more slowly than usual across the park, when Douglas, with a conscious laugh, which went sharply, like a needle, through the poor curate’s heart, declined to join them, but begged they ‘would not mind’ leaving him behind.

‘When a fellow has the pluck to do it, things generally go well with him,’ Charley said.

The two brothers were very good friends. The subject of Anne was one which had never been discussed between them, but Willie Ashley knew by instinct what were his brother’s sentiments, and

Charley was conscious that he knew. The little roughness with which the one thrust his arm into the other's spoke of itself a whole volume of sympathy, and they walked through the sunshine and under the flickering shadows of the trees, slowly and heavily, the curate with his head bent, and his brown beard, of which he was as proud as was becoming to a young clergyman, lying on his breast.

'Pluck carries everything before it,' he said, with a sigh. 'I never was one of your plucky ones.'

'If you call that pluck!' cried the other, 'when a fellow thinks of nothing but himself, and goes straight before him, whatever happens.'

The curate pressed his brother's arm with tacit thanks, but he sighed even more. 'All the same it was a plucky thing to do,' he said.

The young men were seen approaching for a long time before they reached the house. 'I wonder what has happened,' said Rose; 'they walk as if they were going to a funeral; but I suppose I had better go and see that everything is ready for the game.' After all this was the important matter, and the Ashleys, though of no great consequence in themselves, were at least the only young men in the parish; and if the Woodheads came, as Rose expected, it looked a poor sort of thing to have no men. What the game was I can scarcely pretend to say. It might be croquet, or it might be lawn tennis. This is entirely a chronological question, and one upon which, as the date of this commencement is a little vague, I cannot take upon me to decide. And just as Willie and Charley approached slowly, in a solemn march, the familiar house to which they had so often turned with steps and hearts less weighted, the Woodheads appeared on the other side.

'I was sure they would come,' cried Rose; 'here

are Gerty and Fanny.' These young ladies were a clergyman's daughters, and might have paired off most suitably with the Ashleys and no harm done ; but perverse humanity may be so far trusted as to make sure that none of the four thought of any such sensible arrangement.

As for Anne, a sigh of satisfaction and relief came from her bosom, not like that deeper sigh which breathed forth the curate's cares. As soon as she had seen the game begun and all comfortable, she would escape to her own business. Her heart beat high with the thought of the meeting that awaited her, and of the long, confiding, lover's talk, the pouring out of all her cares into another heart which was her own. Anne had not been accustomed to much sympathy in her life. She had not wanted it perhaps. She loved her little sister with her whole heart ; but a high sense of honour had kept her, even when a child, from confiding to Rose any of the little jars and frets of which Rose's mother was the chief cause ; and what other cares had Anne ? So that the delight of saying everything that was in her heart was as new to her as the love that made it possible. And it was one of the elements of wondering happiness that filled her whole being to find out how many things she had to tell. She had thought herself reserved, unexpansive, sometimes even cold and heartless, when she beheld the endless confidential chatter of other girls, and wondered why it was that she had nothing to confide. But now she was half dismayed and half transported to discover how much she too had to say. The deep waters of her heart seemed to flow over from that secret place, and pour out in an irrestrainable flood. It seemed to herself that she kept them in with difficulty even to other people *now*. She had so much to tell him that she could scarcely help preluding even to those who were indifferent, betraying

to them the great tide of utterance that was in her. As a matter of fact, she did not at all betray herself; the Woodheads and the Ashleys saw that Anne was slightly flushed and feverish, justifying the complaint she made of a headache, for the sake of which she feared staying out in the sun; and one of the former, who was a medical young lady, accustomed to manage all the lighter maladies of her father's parish, immediately prescribed for the sufferer.

'Don't stay out here,' Miss Fanny said; 'it is the worst thing possible. Go and lie down; or, if you don't like that, sit down in the shade and take a quiet book. Have you got a novel?—if it's not an exciting one, that will do—but keep yourself perfectly quiet and never mind us. Her pulse is just a little excited—nothing to be alarmed about—if she will but go and lie down.'

The others, especially the two young men, exchanged furtive glances. Willie pressed Charley's arm with a whisper, 'Keep it up, old fellow!' Poor curate! he looked piteously at the girl whom he had not had the courage to try for. Would her cheeks have taken that lovely flush, her eye got that anxious, nervous brightness for him? Was it all a question of pluck, and who should be the first to speak? He watched her going back to the house, across the flower garden, with his lips in an unconscious foolish gape of self-renunciation and tender pity and regret. But happily that rich brown beard of his hid the imbecility of this pathetic simple gaze. And then he turned with sober resolution to the game. He cared for nothing any more now that Anne had gone. But an Englishman must play his game out whatever happens; though heaven and earth should melt away.

Nobody suspected her, nobody dreamt what Anne was about to do. That she should do anything that was not open and manifest entered into no

one's idea of her. She had always been mistress of herself and all her ways, and had never quailed before the face of man. Did she feel guilty now when she thus appeared to accept the advice offered to her—appeared to consent to take shelter from the sun, and went back to the house to lie down, or take a quiet book, as was recommended? Anne was a great deal too much occupied with her own thoughts and plans to feel any of those little guilts yet. She was scarcely conscious of what she herself felt and thought. She had to carry the report of the morning to the other person, who was as much concerned as she was in it; to tell him everything, to know what he had to say, to consult with him as to what they were to do. With all this in her heart, a flood of thought, rising and falling, like waves of the sea, is it possible that she could think of what the others would say, or even of the novel aspect of her subterfuge and evasion? She could think of nothing about them, but of how to get free, to be delivered from her companions. To see him was necessary, indispensable. She had never permitted it to be supposed that she would not see him, or suffered anything to be drawn from her which could imply an intention of giving him up. Her father had said nothing on this subject. There had been neither condition nor promise. But still it was no doubt contrary to Anne's character, as it was to high honour and sincerity, that she should allow it to be supposed that she was returning to the house on account of her headache, when her intention was to go out another way and meet her lover. When she thought of it afterwards the flush of shame which came over her ran from head to foot; but at the present moment she was entirely unmoved by it. The idea did not so much as cross the threshold of her mind.

She went softly into the cool and silent house.

There was nobody visible in the long passages, nor in the hall through which she passed, not consciously going with any precaution, yet making little sound with her light foot. Even Mr. Mountford was out; the doors stood open, the sunshine streamed in here and there at a window making a bar of blazing whiteness across the corridor or stair. Old Saymore was in the open vestibule, full of plants and flowers, into which the great door opened. He was standing before a tall vase of white glass, almost as high as himself, in which he was arranging with great anxiety and interest a waving bouquet of tall ferns and feathery branches. Old Saymore had a soul for art, and the fancies of his young mistress stood in place of all the canons and science of beauty to his mind. He stood with his head on one side, now and then walking a few steps backward to consider the combination of his leaves like an artist before a picture, pulling one forward, pushing one back, pondering with the gravest countenance how to prop up in the middle the waving plume of sumach with which he intended to crown the edifice. He was too much absorbed in his performance to notice Anne, who for her part was too completely preoccupied by hers to see him where he stood, embowered in all that greenery, calculating and considering with the most serious countenance as if the weight of an empire was on his shoulders. As she ran down the steps he heard her for the first time, and turned round hurriedly, moved by the hope of finding a critic and adviser. But his cry of 'Miss Anne!' failed to reach her ear. Her heart was beating high, her thoughts rushing at such a rapid rate that they made a little atmosphere of sound about her, and shut out all less ethereal appeals.

After the Ashleys had left the Rectory, Mr. Cosmo Douglas for his part raised himself from the grass where he had lain so luxuriously puffing his

cigar. He was more amused than distressed by the confusion he had brought among them. Charley Ashley was his friend, but the affection had been chiefly on one side. It had been, as the other very well knew, a distinction for Ashley, who was not distinguished in any other way, to be known as the friend of a personage so much more brilliant and popular than himself. Douglas had been accustomed to smile when he was asked by his admirers 'what he could see' in the good fellow who was neither clever nor gay, nor rich, nor witty, and who had, indeed, no particular recommendation except his goodness. It pleased him to attach to himself this useful, faithful, humble friend, who was always ready to stand up for him, and never likely to bring him into any scrape or trouble. And he had always been ready, he thought, to do anything for Charley—to coach him for an examination, to write an essay for him, to 'pull him through' any of the crises of a college career. But to go so far as to curb his own fancy for a girl who pleased him because Charley had set his affections in the same quarter, was a thing entirely beyond Cosmo's perceptions of the duties of friendship. And when he saw the dismal looks of his friend—his heavy dropping back upon the sympathy of Willie, his younger brother, who had never hitherto been his confidant, and the suppressed indignation towards himself of that younger and always jealous companion—he was more tickled than grieved by it. The idea that he could find a serious rival in Ashley never entered his thoughts—or, indeed, that anyone should pay the slightest regard to poor Charley while he was by. Douglas had, indeed, so much confidence in the humility of his friend that he felt his own preference of any thing or person to be a quite sufficient reason why Charley should give it up. 'He likes to give in to me,' was what he had said on many previous

occasions; and he was unable to understand how any other affection could be more deeply rooted in Ashley's bosom than that which was directed to himself. Therefore he only smiled at what he supposed a momentary petulance. Good simple soul! perhaps Douglas respected his friend more that he was capable of being so badly 'hit.' But yet he could scarcely realise the possibility of it. Charley in love had not presented itself to him as a credible idea. It made him laugh in spite of himself. And as for interfering with Charley!—as if anyone could suppose it possible that Charley was a man to catch a lady's eye.

Cosmo's first visit had been at Christmas, when all was new to him, and when the revelation of the two girls at Mount, so full of life and movement amid the gentle stagnation of the parish, had been the most delightful surprise to the resigned visitor, who had come as a matter of duty, determined to endure anything, and make himself agreeable to Charley's friends. 'You never told me what sort of neighbours you had,' he had said almost with indignation. 'Neighbours! I told you about the Mountfords and the Woodheads, and Lord Meadowlands, who is our great gun,' said Charley tranquilly. 'You speak as if they were all the same—Mountfords and Woodheads and Smiths and Jones—whereas Miss Mountford would be remarked in any society,' Douglas had said. He remembered afterwards that Charley had looked at him for a moment before he replied, and had grown red; but all he had said was, 'I didn't know that you thought much about girls.' All this passed through Douglas's mind as he stood looking after the two brothers, watching the mournfulness of their march with an irrepressible sense of the ludicrous. To see that victim of fate leaning on his brother's arm, dropping now and then a melancholy word or deep-heaved sigh, and walking

gloomily, as after a funeral, to the afternoon 'game,' was a sight at which the most sympathetic looker-on might have been excused for smiling. 'I didn't know that you thought much about girls!' Was there ever a more stupid remark? And how was I to know *he* thought much about girls? Douglas asked himself with another laugh. His conscience was easily satisfied on this point. And he had come down at the beginning of the long vacation to see a little more of the Ashleys' neighbours. He could not but feel that it must be a relief to them also to see a conversible being, an alive and awake human creature amidst those scenes of rural life.

But now how far things had gone! Douglas had been a month at the Rectory, and as his eyes followed the two Ashleys along the white sun-swept road and away under the shadow of the park trees, the idea came to him, with a curious sense of expansive and enlarged being, that the masses of foliage sweeping away towards the west, amid which the two solemn wayfarers soon disappeared, would one day, in all probability, be his own. 'No, by the bye, not that; that's the entailed part,' he said to himself; then laughed again, this time partly in gentle self-ridicule, partly in pleasure, and turned his face the other way, towards Lower Lilford—for he had made himself master of the whole particulars. Facing this way, and with the laugh still on his lips, he suddenly found himself in the presence of the Rector, who had come out by his own study window at the sight of the solitary figure on the lawn. Douglas felt himself taken in the act—though of what it would have been hard to say. He grew red in spite of himself under the gaze of the Rector's mild and dull eyes.

'Have the boys left you alone? I can't think how they could be so rude,' Mr. Ashley said.

'Not rude at all, sir. It is I who am rude. I was lazy, and promised to follow them when I had

finished my—novel.' Happily, he recollected in time that he had been holding one in his hand. 'I am going now,' he added. 'I dare say I shall catch them up before they get to the house.'

'I was afraid they were leaving you to take care of yourself—that is not our old-fashioned way,' said the old clergyman. 'I wish you a pleasant walk. It is a fine afternoon, but you will find the road dusty. I advise you to go over the meadows and round the lower way.'

'That is just how I intended to go.'

'Very sensible. The boys always take the high road. The other takes you round by the Beeches, much the prettiest way; but it is longer round, and that is why they never use it. A pleasant walk to you,' Mr. Ashley said, waving his hand as he went back to the house.

Douglas laughed to himself as he took the path through the meadows which Mr. Ashley had indicated. The Rector had not as yet interested himself much in what was going on, and the simplicity with which he had suggested the way which the lovers had chosen, and which led to their trysting-place, amused the intruder still more. 'If he but knew!' Douglas said to himself, transferring to the old clergyman the thoughts that filled the mind of his son, by a very natural heightening of his own importance. And yet, to tell the truth, had Mr. Ashley known, it would have been a great relief to his mind, as releasing Charley from a great danger and the parish from a possible convulsion. To know this, however, might have lessened the extreme satisfaction with which Douglas set out for the meeting. He went slowly on across the green fields, all bright in the sunshine, across the little stream, and up the leafy woodland road that led to the Beeches, his heart pleasantly agitated, his mind full of delightful anticipations. Anne herself was sweet to him, and

his conquest of her flattered him in every particular. Happiness, importance, wealth, an established place in the world, were all coming to him, linked hand in hand with the loves and joys which surrounded the girl's own image. He had no fear of the consequences. Remorseless fathers were not of his time. Such mediæval furniture had been cleared out of the world. He expected nothing from this meeting but acceptance, reconciliation, love, and happiness.

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER THE BEECHES.

THE Beeches were a beautiful clump of trees on a knoll in the middle of the park. They were renowned through the county, and one of the glories of Mount. When the family was absent—which did not happen often—picnic parties were made up to visit them. There was nothing like them in all the country round. The soil was rich and heavy round them with the shedding of their own leaves, and when the sun got in through their big branches and touched that brown carpet it shone like specks of gold. Some of the branches were like trees in themselves, and the great grey trunks like towers. One of them had been called, from time immemorial, the lover's tree. It was scrawled over with initials, some of them half a century old, or more. From the elevation on which they stood the spectator looked down upon the house lying below among its gardens, on the green terrace and the limes, and could watch what the group there was doing, while himself safe from all observation. When Douglas had informed Anne of her father's rejection of his suit, she had bidden him come to this spot to hear the issue of her own interview with Mr. Mountford.

He seated himself tranquilly enough under the lover's tree to await her coming. He was not too much agitated to smoke his cigar. Indeed, he was not much agitated at all. He had no fear for the eventual issue. True, it might not come immediately. He did not know that he wanted it to come immediately. To love is one thing, to marry another. So long as he was sure of Anne, he did not mind waiting for a year or two. And he felt that he was sure of Anne, and in that case, eventually, of her father too. Consequently, he sat still and waited, pleased, in spite of himself, with the little lawlessness. To be received in the ordinary way as a son-in-law, to kiss the ladies of the house, and shake hands with the men, and be told in a trembling voice that it was the choicest treasure of the family that was being bestowed upon him, were all things which a man of courage has to go through, and does go through without flinching. But on the whole it was more delightful to have Anne steal away to him out of all commonplace surroundings and make him sure of her supreme and unfailing love, whatever anyone might say—with, *bien entendu*, the paternal blessing in the background, to be won after a little patience. Douglas was flattered in all his wishes and fancies by this romantic beginning. He would have the good, he thought, both of the old system of love-making and the new—Anne by herself, without any drawbacks, willing to dare any penalties for his sake; but at the end everything that was legitimate and proper—settlements and civilities. He liked it better so than if it had been necessary to wind up everything in a few months, and marry and be settled; indeed it pleased him much, being so sure as he was of all that was to follow, to have this little secret and clandestine intercourse. He liked it. To get Anne to do so much as this for him was a triumph; his vanity overflowed while he sat and

waited for her, though vanity was but a small part of his character. He reached that spot so soon that he saw the beginning of the 'game,' and Anne's white figure going back through the flower garden all blazing with colour, to the house. What excuse had she been able to find for leaving them? She must have invented some excuse. And he saw the curate settling himself to that 'game,' with unspeakable amusement. He took his cigar from between his lips to laugh. Poor old Charley! his heart was broken, but he did his duty like a man. He watched him settling to his afternoon's work with Gertrude Woodhead as his partner, and laughed, feeling the full humour of the event, and enjoying the tremendous seriousness with which that sacrifice to duty was made. Then, while the game went on in the bright foreground of the picture, he saw the moving speck of that white figure re-issuing on the other side of the house, and advancing towards him, threading her way among the trees. It was for him that Anne did this, and he it was alone of all concerned who could sit here calmly puffing the blue smoke among the branches, and waiting for his happiness to come to him. Never was man more elated, more flattered, more perfectly contented with himself.

He threw the cigar away when she was within a short distance of the spot, and went to meet her with triumphant pleasure.

'My faithful Anne—my true love,' he said as he met her. And Anne came to him; her eyes shining, her lips apart with eagerness. What a meeting it was! No tame domestic reception and hubbub of family excitement could compare with it. How glad and flattered he felt that it was a clandestine indulgence, and that papa had not vulgarised everything by giving his consent! Then they sat down upon the knoll, arm linked in arm, and clasping each

other's hands. There was the peaceful house within sight, and the party on the green terrace absorbed in their inferior amusement, in complete ignorance, not knowing what romance was going on, scarcely out of their range of vision, under the trees. All these experiences served to enhance the delight of his position. For the first few minutes he attached less importance to the words which Anne said.

‘But you do not seem to understand me. My father will not consent.’

‘If *you* consent, my darling, what do I want more? I am not afraid of your father.’

‘But Cosmo—listen! you are not really paying any attention——’

‘Every attention, to the real matter in question. I am reading that in your eyes, in your hands, in you altogether. If I am too happy to take any notice of those vulgarer symbols, words——’

‘But they are not vulgar symbols. Yes, I am happy too. I am not afraid of anything. But, Cosmo, you must listen, and you must understand. My father refuses his consent.’

‘For how long?’ he said with a smile. ‘I also should like to refuse you something for the pleasure of being persuaded to forswear myself. I think papa is right. I should hold out as long as you would put any faith in the delusion of my resistance.’

‘It is no delusion,’ said Anne, shaking her head. ‘You must not think so. It is very serious. He has threatened me. There was no make-believe in his mind, Cosmo.’

‘Threatened you? With what? Ah! so should I if I thought you were going to desert me.’

‘You will not see how serious it is! I do not believe he will give in, Cosmo. He has threatened me that if I persevere he will leave everything he has to leave, away from me.’

‘Away from you? But he has no power to do that,’ said the young man. ‘It is skilful of him to try your faithfulness—but he might have tried it by less conventional means.’

‘Yes, he has the power,’ said Anne, neglecting the other part of this speech. ‘He has power over everything, except, indeed, the entail; and I believe he will do what he says. My father is not a man at all likely to try my faithfulness. He knows me, for one thing.’

‘And knows you true as steel,’ said Cosmo, looking admiringly in her face and still quite unimpressed by the news.

‘Knows that I am not one to give way. He knows that very well. So here is something for your serious consideration. No, indeed, it is no joke. You must not laugh. We must face what is before us,’ said Anne, endeavouring to withdraw her hand and half offended by his unbelief.

‘I cannot face your frown,’ said Cosmo; ‘that is the only thing I am really afraid of. What! must it really be so stern as this? But these hard fathers, my darling, belong to the fifteenth century. You don’t mean to tell me that rebellious daughters are shut up in their rooms, and oaths insisted upon, and paternal curses uttered *now*!’

‘I said nothing about being shut up in my room; but it is quite certain,’ said Anne, with a little heat, ‘that if I oppose him in this point my father will take all that ought to come to me and give it to Rose.’

‘To Rose!’ a shade of dismay stole over Cosmo’s face. ‘But I thought,’ he said—showing an acquaintance with the circumstances which after, when she thought of it, surprised Anne—‘I thought your fortune came from your mother, not from Mr. Mountford at all.’

‘And so it does; but it is all in his hands; my

mother trusted in my father entirely, as she was of course quite right to do.'

'As it must have been the height of imprudence to permit her to do!' cried Douglas, suddenly reddening with anger. 'How could the trustees be such fools? So you, like the money, are entirely in Mr. Mountford's hands?'

All at once the tone had ceased to be that of a lovers' interview. Anne, startled and offended, this time succeeded in drawing her hand out of his.

'Yes,' she said, with a chill of surprise in her voice, 'entirely in his hands.'

What was going to follow? Under the great beechen boughs, through the warm summer sunshine there seemed all at once to breathe a wintry gale which penetrated to the heart.

This sudden cloud was dissipated in a moment by another laugh, which rang almost too loudly among the trees. 'Well,' he said, drawing her arm through his again, and holding the reluctant hand clasped fast, 'what of that? Because you are in his hands, Anne, my own, do you think I am going to let you slip out of mine?'

The sun grew warm again, and the air delicious as before. Two on one side, and all the world on the other, is not that a perfectly fair division? So long as there are two—if there should come to be but one, then the aspect of everything is changed. Anne's hands clasped between two bigger ones all but disappeared from view. It would be hard, very hard, to slip out of that hold; and it was a minute or two before she regained possession of what Cosmo had called the vulgarer symbols, words. Without recurrence to their aid between people who love each other, how much can be said!

'That is all very well,' said Anne, at last; 'but whatever we may do or say we must come back to this: My father has promised to disin-

herit me, Cosmo, and he will not go back from his word.'

'Disinherit! the very word sounds romantic. Are we in a novel or are we not? I thought disinherit was only a word for the stage.'

'But you know this is mere levity,' said Anne. She smiled in spite of herself. It pleased her to the bottom of her heart that he should take it so lightly, that he should refuse to be frightened by it. 'We are not boy and girl,' she said, with delightful gravity of reproof. 'We *must* think seriously of a thing which affects our interests so much. The question is, what is to be done?'

Had she but known how keenly under his levity he was discussing that question within himself! But he went on, still half laughing as if it were the best joke in the world.

'The only thing, so far as I can see, that is *not* to be done,' he said, 'is to obey papa and give me up.'

'Give up—I would not give up a dog!' cried Anne, impetuously; 'and Cosmo, you!'

'I am not a dog; and yet in one sense, in Mr. Mountford's eyes—— What is it, Anne, that hedges you round with such divinity, you landed people? Mountford of Mount: it sounds very well, I confess. And why was I not Douglas of somewhere or other? It is very hard upon you, but yet it is not my fault.'

'I like you infinitely better,' cried Anne, with proud fervour, 'that you are Douglas of nowhere, but stand upon yourself—the father of your own fortunes. That is the thing to be proud of—if one has ever any right to be proud.'

'I have not achieved much to be proud of as yet,' he said, shaking his head; and then there was again a pause, perhaps not quite so ecstatic a pause, for practical necessity and the urgent call for a

decision of one kind or other began to be felt, and silenced them. It was easy to say that there was one thing that was *not* to be done—but after? Then for the first time in her life Anne felt the disability of her womanhood. This tells for little so long as the relations between men and women are not in question. It is when these ties begin—and a girl, who has perhaps taken the initiative all her life, finds herself suddenly reduced to silence in face of her lover—that the bond is felt. What could she say or suggest? She had exhausted her powers when she declared with such proud emphasis that to give up was impossible. Then nature, which is above all law, stepped in and silenced her. What could she do further? It was for him to speak. The first sense of this compulsion was both sweet and painful to her—painful, because her mind was overflowing with active energy and purpose which longed for utterance: sweet, as the sign and symbol of a new condition, a union more rich and strange than any individuality. Anne had hesitated little in her life, and had not known what it was to wait. Now she bent her head to the necessity in a curious maze of feeling—bewildered, happy, a little impatient, wondering and hoping, silent as she had never in all her life before been tempted to be.

As for Douglas, he was silent too, with a much less delightful consciousness. In such circumstances what are the natural things for a man to say? That what his love has is nothing to him, so long as she brings him herself—that if there is only a sacrifice of money in question, no money can be allowed to stand in the way of happiness; that he has no fear, unless it might be for her; that to labour for her, to make her independent of all the fathers in the world, is his first privilege; and that the only thing to be considered is, when and how she will make his happiness complete by trusting

herself to his care. These are, no doubt, the right things for a man to say, especially if they happen to be true, but even whether they are quite true or not, as his natural *rôle* requires. Then, on the other side, the woman (if she has any sense) will certainly come in and impose conditions and limit the fulness of the sacrifice; so that, what by masculine boldness of plan, and feminine caution of revisal, something reasonable and practical is at last struck out. But the caution, the repression, the prudence, ought not to be on the man's side. Nothing can be more distinct than this great law. It becomes the woman to see all the drawbacks, to hold back, and to insist upon every prudential condition, not to make herself a burden upon him or permit him to be overwhelmed by his devotion. But it is not from his side that these suggestions of prudence can be allowed to come, however strongly he may perceive them. Perhaps it is as hard upon the man, who sees all the difficulties, to be compelled to adopt this part, as it is on the woman, accustomed to lead the way, to be silent and hold back. Douglas was in this predicament, if Anne felt all the mingled penalties and privileges of the other. He must do it, or else acknowledge himself a poor creature. And Cosmo had not the slightest inclination to appear a poor creature in Anne's eyes. Yet at the same time he felt that to propose to this impetuous girl—who was quite capable of taking him at his word—that she should marry him at once in face of her father's menace, was madness. What was he to do? He sat silent—for more minutes than Anne's imagination approved. Her heart began to sink, a wondering pang to make itself felt in her breast, not for herself so much as for him. Was he about to fail to the emergency? to show himself unprepared to meet it? Was he, could it be possible, more concerned about the loss of the money than herself?

‘Here am I in a nice predicament,’ he burst forth at last; ‘what am I to say to you? Anne—you who have been brought up to wealth, who have known nothing but luxury—what am I to say to you? Is it to be my part to bring you down to poverty, to limit your existence? I who have no recommendation save that of loving you, which heaven knows many a better man must share with me; I an intruder whom you did not know a year ago—an interloper——’

There are some cases in which there is no policy like the naked truth. Anne held up her hands to stop him as he went on, exclaiming softly, ‘Cosmo, Cosmo!’ in various tones of reproach and horror. Then at last she stopped him practically, by putting one of her hands upon his mouth—an action which made her blush all over with tender agitation, pleasure, and shame.

‘How can you say such things? Cosmo! I will not hear another word.’

‘Am I anything but an interloper? How is any man worth calling a man to let you sacrifice yourself to him, Anne?’

‘I shall soon think it is you that want to throw me over,’ she said.

This shifted the tragic issue of the question and put him more at ease. If it could but be brought back to the general ground, on which mutual professions of fidelity would suffice and time could be gained! So far as that went, Cosmo knew very well what to say. It was only the practical result that filled him with alarm. Why had he been so hasty in declaring himself? The preliminaries of courtship may go on for years, but the moment an answer has been asked and given, some conclusion must be come to. However, it is always easy to answer a girl when she utters such words as these. He eluded the real difficulty, following her lead, and so

filled up the time with lovers' talk that the hour flew by without any decision. They talked of the one subject in a hundred different tones—it was all so new, and Anne was so easily transported into that vague and beautiful fairyland where her steps were treading for the first time. And she had so much to say to him on her side; and time has wings, and can fly on some occasions though he is so slow on others. It was she who at the end of many digressions finally discovered that while they had been talking the green terrace below had become vacant, the company dispersed. She started up in alarm.

'They have all gone in. The game is over. How long we must have been sitting here! And they will be looking for me. I was obliged to say I had a headache. Indeed I had a headache,' said Anne, suddenly waking to a sense of her subterfuge and hanging her head—for he had laughed—which was a failure of perception on his part and almost roused her pride to arms. But Cosmo was quick-sighted and perceived his mistake.

'Dear Anne! is this the first issue of faith to me?' he said. 'What am I to do, my darling? Kill myself for having disturbed your life and made your head ache, or——'

'Do not talk nonsense, Cosmo; but I must go home.'

'And we have been talking nonsense, and have come to no settlement one way or another,' he said, with a look of vexation. Naturally Anne took the blame to herself. It could only be her fault.

'The time has gone so fast,' she said, with a sigh. 'But, perhaps, on the whole, it is best not to settle anything. Let us take a little time to think. Is there any hurry? Nobody can separate us so long as we are faithful to each other. There is no need that I know for—any conclusion.'

Poor Cosmo! there were points in which at this moment his was a hard case. He was obliged to look vexed and complain, though he was so fully convinced of the wisdom of this utterance. 'You forget,' he said tenderly, 'that I have to go away, to return to my life of loneliness—perhaps to ask myself if Anne was only a heavenly dream, a delusion, and to find myself waking——'

'To what?' she replied, in her enthusiasm, half angry, 'to what?' If you have my heart with you and my thoughts, is not that the best part of me? The Anne that will be with you will be the true Anne, not the outside of her which must stay here.'

'But I want the outside too. Ah, Anne, if I were to stay here, if I could live at your gate like Charley Ashley (poor fellow!). But you forget that I must go away.'

'I don't forget it. When must you go?' She sank her voice a little and drew closer to him, and looked at him with a cloud rising over her face. He *must* go, there was no eluding that certainty, and to think of it was like thinking of dying—yet of a sweet death to be borne heroically for the sake each of each, and with a speedy bright resurrection in prospect; but it would be an extinction of all the delight of living so long as it lasted. Cosmo's mind was not so elevated as Anne's, nor his imagination so inspiring, but the look of visionary anguish and courage went to his heart.

'I don't deserve it,' he cried with a broken voice; which was very true. Then recovering himself, 'It would not do for me to linger after what has passed between your father and me. It will be a terrible wrench, and without knowing when we are to meet again. Love, it must be before Saturday,' he said.

They were standing close, very close together,

clasping each other's hands. Two tears came into Anne's eyes, great lakes of moisture not falling, though brimming over. But she gave him such a smile as was all the sweeter reflected in them. 'By Friday, then—we must make up our minds what we are to do.'

His fears and doubtfulness yielded for the moment to an impulse of real emotion. 'How am I to live without you, now that I know you?' he said.

'You will not be without me, Cosmo! Did I not tell you the best of me would be with you always? Let us both think with all our might what will be the right thing for us.'

'I know what I shall feel to be the best, Anne.' He said this with a little fervour, suddenly coming to see—as now and then a man does—by a sudden inspiration, entirely contrary to his judgment, what would be his only salvation. This answered his purpose far better than any cleverness he could have invented. She shook her head.

'We must not insist on choosing the happiest way,' she said. 'We must wait—in every way, I feel sure that to wait is the only thing we can do.'

'Certainly not the happiest,' he said, with emphasis. 'There is no reason because of that interview with your father why I should not come to say good-bye. I will come on Friday publicly; but to-morrow, Anne, to-morrow, here——'

She gave him her promise without hesitation. There had been no pledge against seeing him asked or given, and it was indispensable that they should settle their plans. And then they parted, he, in the agitation and contagious enthusiasm of the moment, drawn closer to the girl whom he loved, but did not understand, nearer knowing her than he had ever been before. The impulse kept him up as on

borrowed wings as far as the enclosure of the park. Then Cosmo Douglas dropped down to earth, ceased to reflect Anne Mountford, and became himself. She on wings which were her own, and borrowed from no one—wings of pure visionary passion, devotion, faith—skimmed through the light air homeward, her heart wrung, her sweet imagination full of visions, her courage and constancy strong as for life or death.

CHAPTER V.

EXPLANATIONS.

It is an awkward and a painful thing to quarrel with a friend when he is staying under your roof; though in that case it will no doubt make a breach, and he will go away, which will relieve you, even if you regret it afterwards. But if there is no quarrel, yet you find out suddenly that you have a grievance—a grievance profound and bitter, but not permitting of explanation—the state of affairs is more painful still; especially if the friend is thrown into your special society, and not taken from you by the general courtesies of the house. It was in this unfortunate position that the young men at the Rectory found themselves on the evening that followed. There was nobody in the house to diminish the pressure. Mrs. Ashley had died some years before, and the Rector, at that time left much alone, as both his sons were absent at school and university, had fallen into the natural unsocial habits of a solitary. He had been obliged to make life bearable for himself by perpetual reading, and now he could do little but read. He was very attentive to his duty, visiting his sick parishioners with the regularity of clock-work, and not much more warmth; but when he

came in he went to his study, and even at table would furtively bring a book with him, to be gone on with if the occasion served. Charley and Willie were resigned enough to this shutting out of their father from the ordinary social intercourse. It liberated them from the curb imposed by his grave looks and silence. He had always been a silent man. Now that he had not his wife to speak to, utterance was a trouble to him. And even his meals were a trouble to Mr. Ashley. He would have liked his tray brought into his study among his books, which was the doleful habit he had fallen into when he was left to eat the bread of tears alone. He gave up this gratification when the boys were at home, but it cost him something. And he painfully refrained even from a book when there were visitors, and now and then during the course of a meal would make a solemn remark to them. He was punctilious altogether about strangers, keeping a somewhat dismal watch to see that they were not neglected. This it was which had brought him out of his study when he saw Douglas alone upon the lawn. 'In your mother's time,' he would say, 'this was considered a pleasant house to stay at. I have given up asking people on my own account; but when you have friends I insist upon attention being paid them.' This made the curate's position doubly irksome; he had to entertain the stranger who was his own friend, yet had, he felt, betrayed him. There was nothing to take Douglas even for an hour off his hands. Willie, as the spectator and sympathiser, was even more indignant than his brother, and disposed to show his indignation; and the curate had to satisfy his father and soothe Willie, and go through a semblance of intimate intercourse with his friend all at the same time. His heart was very heavy; and, at the best of times, his conversation was not of a lively description; nor had he the power

of throwing off his troubles. The friend who had proved a traitor to him had been his leader, the first fiddle in every orchestra where Charley Ashley had produced his solemn bass. All this made the state of affairs more intolerable. In the evening what could they do? They had to smoke together in the little den apportioned to this occupation, which the Rector himself detested; for it rained, to wind up all those miseries. As long as it was fine, talk could be eluded by strolling about the garden; but in a little room, twelve feet by eight, with their pipes lit and everything calculated to make the contrasts of the broken friendship seem stronger, what could be done? The three young men sat solemnly, each in a corner, puffing forth clouds of serious smoke. Willie had got a 'Graphic,' and was turning it over, pretending to look at the pictures. Charley sat at the open window, with his elbow leaning upon the sill, gazing out into the blackness of the rain. As for Douglas, he tilted his chair back on its hind legs, and looked just as usual—a smile even hovered about his mouth. He was the offender, but there was no sense of guilt in his mind. The cloud which had fallen on their relationship amused him instead of vexing him. It wrapped Charley Ashley in the profoundest gloom, who was innocent; but it rather exhilarated the culprit. Ten minutes had passed, and not a word had been said, which was terrible to the sons of the house, but agreeable enough to their guest. He had so much to think of; and what talk could be so pleasant as his own thoughts? certainly not poor Ashley's prosy talk. He swayed himself backward now and then on his chair, and played a tune with his fingers on the table; and a smile hovered about his mouth. He had passed another hour under the Beeches before the rain came on, and everything had been settled to his satisfaction. He had not required to

make any bold proposal, and yet he had been argued with and sweetly persuaded as if he had suggested the rashest instantaneous action. He could not but feel that he had managed this very cleverly, and he was pleased with himself, and happy. He did not want to talk; he had Anne to think about, and all her tender confidences, and her looks and ways altogether. She was a girl whose love any man might have been proud of. And no doubt the father's opposition would wear away. He saw no reason to be uneasy about the issue. In these days there is but one way in which such a thing can end, if the young people hold out. And, with a smile of happy assurance, he said to himself that Anne would hold out. She was not a girl that was likely to change.

Some trifling circumstance here attracted Cosmo's attention to the very absurd aspect of affairs. A big moth, tumbling in out of the rain, flew straight at the candle, almost knocked the light out, burned off its wings, poor imbecile! and fell with a heavy thud, scorched and helpless, upon the floor. The curate, whose life was spent on summer evenings in a perpetual crusade against those self-destroying insects, was not even roused from his gloom by this brief and rapidly-concluded tragedy. He turned half round, gave a kind of groan by way of remark, and turned again to his gloomy gaze into the rain. Upon this an impulse, almost of laughter, seized Douglas in spite of himself. 'Charley, old fellow, what are you so grumpy about?' he said.

This observation from the culprit, whom they were both trying their best not to fall upon and slay, was as a thunderbolt falling between the two brothers. The curate turned his pale countenance round with a look of astonishment. But Willie jumped up from his chair. 'I can't stand this,' he said, 'any longer.

Why should one be so frightened of the rain? I don't know what you other fellows mean to do, but I am going out.'

'And we are going to have it out,' said Cosmo, as the other hurried away. He touched the foot of the curate, who had resumed his former attitude, with his own. 'Look here, Charley, don't treat me like this; what have I done?' he said.

'Done? I don't know what you mean. Nothing,' said the curate, turning his head round once more, but still with his eyes fixed on the rain.

'Come in, then, and put it into words. You should not condemn the greatest criminal without a hearing. You think somehow—why shouldn't you own it? it shows in every look—you think I have stood in your way.'

'No,' said Ashley again. His under-lip went out with a dogged resistance, his big eyelids drooped. 'I haven't got much of a way—the parish, that's about all—I don't see how *you* could do me any damage there.'

'Why are you so bitter, Charley? If you had ever taken me into your confidence you may be sure I would not have interfered—whatever it might have cost me.'

'I should like to know what you are talking about,' the other said, diving his hands into the depths of his pockets, and turning to the rain once more.

'Would you? I don't think it; and it's no good naming names. Look here. Will you believe me if I say I never meant to interfere? I never found out what was in your mind till it was too late.'

'I don't know that there is anything in my mind,' Charley said. He was holding out with all his might; but the fibres of his heart were giving way, and the ice melting. To be sure, how should any one have

found out? had it not been hidden away at the very bottom of his heart? Anne had never suspected it, how should Cosmo? He would not even turn his head to speak; but he was going, going! he felt it, and Douglas saw it. The offender got up, and laid his hand upon the shoulder of his wounded friend.

‘I’d rather have cut off my hand, or tugged out my heart, than wound you, Charley; but I never knew till it was too late.’

All this, perhaps, was not quite true; but it was true—enough. Douglas did not want to quarrel; he liked his faithful old retainer. A bird in the hand—that is always worth something, though perhaps not so much as is the worth of the two who are in the bush; and he is a foolish man who will turn away the certain advantage of friendship for the chance of love; anyhow, the address went entirely into the simple, if wounded, heart.

‘I didn’t mean to show I was vexed. I don’t know that I’m vexed—a man is not always in the same disposition,’ he said, but his voice was changing. Douglas patted him on the shoulder, and went back to his seat.

‘You needn’t envy me—much,’ said Douglas. ‘We don’t know what’s to come of it: the father won’t hear of me. He would have had nothing to say to you either, and think what a rumpus it would have made in the parish! And there’s the Rector to think of. Charley——’

‘Perhaps you are right,’ Charley said, with a great heave of his shoulders. His pipe had gone out. As he spoke, he got up slowly, and came to the table to look for the matches. Cosmo lighted one, and held it out to him, looking on with interest while the solemn process of rekindling was gone through. Charley’s face, lighted by the fitful flame as he puffed, was still as solemn as if it had been a question of life

and death ; and Cosmo, looking on, kept his gravity too. When this act was accomplished, the curate in silence gripped his friend's hand, and thus peace was made. Poor faithful soul ; his heart was still as heavy as lead—but pain was possible, though strife was not possible. A load was taken off his honest breast.

‘I’ve seen it coming,’ he said, puffing harder than was needful. ‘I oughtn’t to have felt it so much. After all, why should I grumble ? I never could have been the man.’

‘You are a far better fellow than I am,’ cried the other, with a little burst of real feeling.

Charley puffed and puffed, with much exertion. The red gleam of the pipe got reflected under his shaggy eyebrows in something liquid. Then he burst into an unsteady laugh.

‘You might as well fire a damp haystack as light a pipe that’s gone out,’ was the next sentimental remark he made.

‘Have a cigar ?’ said Cosmo, tenderly, producing a case out of his pocket, with eager benevolence. And thus their peace was made. Anne’s name was not mentioned, neither was there anything said but these vague allusions to the state of affairs generally. Of all things in the world sentimental explanations are most foreign to the intercourse of young Englishmen with each other. But when Willie Ashley returned, very wet, and with an incipient cold in his head from the impatient flight he had made, he was punished for his cowardly abandonment of an unpleasant position by finding his brother with the old bonds refitted upon him, completely restored to his old devotion and subjection to Cosmo. Willie retired to bed soon after, kicking off his boots with an energy which was full of wrath. ‘The fool !’ he said to himself ; while the reconciled pair carried on their tobacco and their reunion till far in the night. They were not conversational, however, though they

were reconciled. Conversation was not necessary to the curate's view of social happiness, and Cosmo was glad enough to go back upon his own thoughts.

While this was going on at the Rectory, Anne for her part was submitting to a still more severe course of interrogation. Mrs. Mountford had discussed the question with herself at some length, whether she should take any notice or not of the domestic convulsion which had occurred under her very eye without having been brought openly to her cognisance. Her husband had of course told her all about it; but Anne had not said anything—had neither consulted her stepmother nor sought her sympathy. After a while, however, Mrs. Mountford sensibly decided that to ignore a matter of such importance, or to make-believe that she was not acquainted with it, would be equally absurd. Accordingly she arranged that Rose should be sent for after dinner to have a dress tried on; which was done, to that young lady's great annoyance and wrath. Mrs. Worth, Mrs. Mountford's maid, was not a person who could be defied with impunity. She was the goddess Fashion, *La Mode* impersonified at Mount. Under her orders she had a niece, who served as maid to Anne and Rose; and these two together made the dresses of the family. It was a great economy, Mrs. Mountford said, and all the county knew how completely successful it was. But to the girls it was a trouble, if an advantage. Mrs. Worth studied their figures, their complexions, and what she called their 'hidiousincrasies'—but she did not study the hours that were convenient for them, or make allowance for their other occupations. And she was a tyrant, if a beneficent one. So Rose had to go, however loth. Lady Meadowlands was about to give a *fête*, a great garden party, at which all 'the best people' were to be assembled. And a new dress was absolutely necessary. Wouldn't it

do in the morning?' she pleaded. But Mrs. Worth was inexorable. And so it happened that her mother had a quiet half-hour in which to interrogate Anne.

The drawing-room was on the side of the house overlooking the flower garden; the windows, a great row of them, flush with the wall outside and so possessing each a little recess of its own within, were all open, admitting more damp than air, and a chilly freshness and smell of the earth instead of the scents of the mignonette. There were two lamps at different ends of the room, which did not light it very well: but Mrs. Mountford was economical. Anne had lit the candles on the writing-table for her own use, and she was a long way off the sofa on which her stepmother sat, with her usual tidy basket of neatly-arranged wools beside her. A little time passed in unbroken quiet, disturbed by nothing but the soft steady downfall of the rain through the great open space outside, and the more distant sound of pattering upon the trees. When Mrs. Mountford said 'Anne,' her stepdaughter did not hear her at first. But there was a slight infraction of the air, and she knew that something had been said.

'Did you speak, mamma?'

'I want to speak to you, Anne. Yes, I think I did say your name. Would you mind coming here for a little? I want to say something to you while Rose is away.'

Anne divined at once what it must be. And she was not unreasonable—it was right that Mrs. Mountford should know: how could she help but know, being the wife of one of the people most concerned? And the thing which Anne chiefly objected to was that her stepmother knew everything about her by a sort of back way, thus arriving at a clandestine knowledge not honestly gained. It was not the stepmother that was to blame, but the father and

fate. She rose and went forward slowly through the partial light—reluctant to be questioned, yet not denying that to ask was Mrs. Mountford's right.

'I sent her away on purpose, Anne. She is too young. I don't want her to know any more than can be helped. My dear, I was very sorry to hear from your father that you had got into that kind of trouble so soon.'

'I don't think I have got into any trouble,' said Anne.

'No, of course I suppose *you* don't think so; but I have more experience than you have, and I am sorry your mind should have been disturbed so soon.'

'Do you call it so very soon?' said Anne. 'I am twenty-one.'

'So you are; I forgot. Well! but it is always too soon when it is not suitable, my dear.'

'It remains to be seen whether it is not suitable, mamma.'

'My love! do you think so little of your father's opinion? That ought to count above everything else, Anne. A gentleman is far better able to form an opinion of another gentleman than we are. Mr. Douglas, I allow, is good-looking and well-bred. I liked him well enough myself; but that is not all—you must acknowledge that is not half enough.'

'My father seems to want a great deal less,' said Anne; 'all that he asks is about his family and his money.'

'Most important particulars, Anne, however romantic you may be; you must see that.'

'I am not romantic,' said Anne, growing red, and resenting the imputation, as was natural; 'and I do not deny they are important details; but not surely to be considered first as the only things worth caring for—which is what my father does.'

'What do you consider the things worth caring

for, dear? Be reasonable. Looks?’ said Mrs. Mountford, laying down her work upon her lap with a benevolent smile. ‘Oh, Anne, my dear child, at your age we are always told that beauty is skin-deep, but we never believe it. And I am not one that would say very much in that respect. I like handsome people myself; but dear, dear, as life goes on, if you have nothing but looks to trust to——!’

‘I assure you,’ said Anne, vehemently, succeeding after two or three attempts to break in, ‘I should despise myself if I thought that beauty was anything. It is almost as bad as money. Neither the one nor the other is yourself.’

‘Oh, I would not go so far as that,’ said Mrs. Mountford, with indulgence. ‘Beauty is a great deal in my opinion, though perhaps it is gentlemen that think most about it. But, my dear Anne, you are a girl that has always thought of duty. I will do you the justice to say that. You may have liked your own way, but even to me, that have not the first claim upon you, you have always been very good. I hope you are not going to be rebellious now. You must remember that your father’s judgment is far more mature than yours. He knows the world. He knows what men are.’

‘So long as he does not know—one thing,’ said Anne, indignantly, ‘what can all that other information matter to me?’

‘And what is the one thing, dear?’ Mrs. Mountford said.

Anne did not immediately reply. She went to the nearest window and closed it, for sheer necessity of doing something; then lingered, looking out upon the rain and the darkness of the night.

‘Thank you, that is quite right,’ said her step-mother. ‘I did not know that window was open. How damp it is, and how it rains! Anne, what is

the one thing? Perhaps I might be of some use if you would tell me. What is it your father does not know?’

‘Me,’ said Anne, coming slowly back to the light. Her slight white figure had the pose of a tall lily, so light, so firm, that its very fragility looked like strength. And her face was full of the constancy upon which, perhaps, she prided herself a little—the loyalty that would not give up a dog, as she said. Mrs. Mountford called it obstinacy, of course. ‘But what does that matter,’ she added, with some vehemence, ‘when in every particular we are at variance? I do not think as he does in anything. What he prizes I do not care for—and what I prize——’

‘My dear, it is your father you are speaking of. Of course he must know better than a young girl like you——’

‘Mamma, it is not his happiness that is involved—it is mine! and I am not such a young girl—I am of age. How can he judge for me in what is to be the chief thing in my life?’

‘Anne,’ said Mrs. Mountford kindly, ‘this young man is almost a stranger to you—you had never seen him a year ago. Is it really true, and are you quite sure that this involves the happiness of your life?’

Anne made no reply. How otherwise? she said indignantly in her heart. Was she a girl to deceive herself in such a matter—was she one to make protestations? She held her head high, erecting her white throat more like a lily than ever. But she said nothing. What was there to say? She could not speak or tell anyone but herself what Cosmo was to her. The sensitive blood was ready to mount into her cheeks at the mere breathing of his name.

Mrs. Mountford shook her head. ‘Oh, foolish

children,' she said, 'you are all the same. Don't think you are the only one, Anne. When you are as old as I am you will have learned that a father's opinion is worth taking, and that your own is not so infallible after all.'

'I suppose,' said Anne softly, 'you are twice my age, mamma—that would be a long time to wait to see which of us was right.'

'I am more than twice your age,' said Mrs. Mountford, with a little heat; then suddenly changing her tone, 'Well! so this is the new fashion we have been hearing so much of. Turn round slowly that I may see if it suits you, Rose.'

CHAPTER VI.

GOOD-BYE.

NEXT day was one of those crowning days of summer which seem the climax, and at the same time the conclusion, of the perfect year. From morning till night there was no shadow upon it, no threatening of a cloud, no breath of unfriendly air. The flowers in the Mount gardens blazed from the level beds in their framework of greenness, the great masses of summer foliage stood out against the soft yet brilliant sky; every outline was round and distinct, detaching itself in ever-varying lines, one curve upon another. Had the weather been less perfect their distinctness would have been excessive and marred the unity of the landscape, but the softness of the summer air harmonised everything in sight and sound alike. The voices on the terrace mingled in subtle musical tones at intervals; and, though every branch of the foliage was perfect in itself, yet all were melodiously mingled, and belonged to each other. On the sea-shore and among the hills

distance seemed annihilated, and every outline pressed upon the eye, too bright, too near for pleasure, alarming the weather-wise. But here, so warmly inland, in a landscape so wealthy and so soft, the atmosphere did not exaggerate, it only brightened. It was the end of August, and changes were preparing among the elements. Next day it might be autumn with a frost-touch somewhere, the first yellow leaf; but to-day it was full summer, a meridian more rich than that of June, yet still meridian, full noon of the seasons.

Il nous reste un gâteau de fête ;
Demain nous aurons du pain noir :

Anne woke up this heavenly morning saying these words to herself. It had rained half the night through, and the morning had risen pale, exhausted as with all this weeping: but after awhile had thought better of it, and sworn to have, ere summer ended, one other resplendent day. Then the sun had got up to his work like a bridegroom, eternal image, in a flush of sacred pride and joy. People said to each other 'What a lovely day!' Though it had been a fine summer, and the harvest had been got in with the help of many a lusty morning and blazing afternoon, yet there was something in this that touched the general heart; perhaps because it was after the rain, perhaps because something in the air told that it was the last, that Nature had surpassed herself, and after this was capable of nothing further. As a matter of fact, nobody could do anything for the delight of the exquisite morning. First one girl stole out, and then another, through the garden, upon which the morning sun was shining; then Mrs. Mountford sailed forth under the shelter of her parasol. Even she, though she was half ashamed of herself, being plump, had put on, dazzled by the morning, a white gown. 'Though I am too

old for white,' she said with a sigh. 'Not too old, but a little too stout, 'm,' said Mrs. Worth, with that ferocious frankness which we have all to submit to from our maids. None of the three reappeared again till the luncheon-bell rang, so demoralised were they. Anne, if truth must be told, went towards the Beeches: 'Il nous reste un gâteau de fête,' she sang to herself under her breath, 'Demain nous aurons du pain noir.'

The same thing happened at the Rectory: even the rector himself came out, wandering, by way of excusing himself for the idleness, about the flower-beds. 'The bedding-out plants have done very well this year,' he said; but he was not thinking of the bedding-out plants any more than the young men were thinking of their cigars. In their minds there was that same sense of the one bit of cake remaining to eat which was in Anne's song. Charley, who had not the cake, but was only to stand by and assist while his friend ate it, was sympathetically excited, yet felt a little forlorn satisfaction in the approaching resumption of the *pain noir*. He was never to get anything better, it appeared; but it would be pleasanter fare when the munching of the *gâteau* was over. And Douglas stole off to consume that last morsel when the curate, reluctantly, out of the sweetness of the morning, went off to his schools. Under the Beeches the day was like a fresh bit out of Paradise. If Adam and Eve are only a fable, as the scientific gentlemen say, what a poet Moses was! Eden has never gone out of fashion to this day. The two under the trees, but for her muslin and his tweed, were, over again, the primæval pair—and perhaps the serpent was about too: but neither Eve had seen it, nor Adam prepared that everlasting plea of self-defence which has been handed down through all his sons. This was how the charmed hours stole on, and the perfection of summer passed through

the perfection of noon ; so many perfections touching each other ! a perfect orb of loveliness and happiness, with that added grace which makes perfection more perfect, the sense of incompleteness—the human crown of hope. All the time they were thinking of the something better, something sweeter, that was to come. ‘Will there ever be such another perfect day ?’ she said, in a wonder at the new discovered bliss with which she was surrounded. ‘Yes, the next,’ he said, ‘on which we shall not have to part.’ To be sure : there was the parting ; without that conclusion, perhaps, this hour would not have been so exquisite : but it was still some hours off, thank heaven !

After luncheon the chairs were carried out to the green terrace where the shadow of the limes fell. The limes got in the way of the sun almost as soon as he began to descend, and threw the most delicious dancing shadow over the grass—a shadow that was quite effectual, and kept the lawn as cool as in the middle of a forest, but which was in itself a lovely living thing, in soft perpetual motion, every little twig and green silken leaf contributing its particular canopy, and flinging down a succession of little bobs and curtseys with every breath of air that blew. ‘Everybody will be out to-day, and I daresay we shall have a great many visitors. Tell Saymore he may bring out the big table,’ said Mrs. Mountford. She liked to feel that her house was the chief house in the neighbourhood, the place to which everybody came. Mrs. Mountford had regretfully relinquished by this time her white gown. We all cling to our white gowns, but when you are stout, it must be acknowledged the experiment is rash. She had not been able to get Mrs. Worth’s candid criticism out of her mind all the morning. ‘Do I look very stout, Rose ?’ she had said, in an unconsciously ingratiating tone. And Rose was still

more entirely impartial than Worth. She threw a careless glance at her mother. 'You do look fat, mamma!' she said. It was hard upon the poor lady; she changed it, with a sigh, for her darkest silk. 'Not black, Worth,' she said faintly. 'If I had my way, 'm,' said Worth, 'I'd dress you always in black. There is nothing like it when one gets to a certain time of life.' It was under the influence of this sobering *douche* that Mrs. Mountford came out again, accompanied by Saymore with her workbasket. It was put down upon the table, a dazzling bit of colour. 'But I really don't feel inclined to work. It is too fine to work,' Mrs. Mountford said. 'What is that you are singing for ever, Anne? I have heard you at it all day.'

Il nous reste un gâteau de fête;
Demain nous aurons du pain noir.

Anne sang without changing colour, though her heart was beating; she had become too breathless for conversation. When would he come for the farewell, and what would her father say? Would he hear of it and come out? What was to happen? She sat very still in her basket-chair, with all the lime leaves waving over her, letting in stray gleams of sunshine that ornamented her as with lines of jewels here and there.

Then, after an interval, two dark figures were seen upon the whiteness and unsheltered light of the road through the park. 'There are the Ashley boys,' said Rose. 'Anne, you will be obliged to play to-day.'

'The Ashley boys! Now that Charley is ordained, you should speak with more respect,' said Mrs. Mountford. Anne looked up, and her heart seemed to stand still—only two of them! But she soon satisfied herself that it was not Cosmo that was the defaulter; she sat, not saying anything, scarcely daring to breathe. The moment had come.

Willie Ashley had not regarded with much satisfaction the reconciliation which he found to his great amazement had taken place while he was out in the rain. Indeed the attitude of his mind had been nothing less than one of disgust, and when he found next day that Douglas was setting out arm-in-arm with the curate, and almost more confidential than before, to walk to Mount, his impatience rose to such a point that he flung off altogether. 'Two may be company, but three is none,' he said to his brother. 'I thought you had a little more spirit; I'm not going to Mount: if you can see yourself cut out like that, I can't. I'll walk up as far as the Woodheads'; I daresay they'll be very glad to get up a game there.' This was how there were only two figures on the road. They were very confidential, and perhaps the curate was supported more than he himself was aware by the certainty that his friend was going away that night. Henceforward the field would be clear. It was not that he had any hope of supplanting Cosmo in his turn, as he had been supplanted; but still to have him away would be something. The black bread is wholesome fare enough when there is not some insolent happiness in the foreground insisting upon devouring before you its hunches of cake.

'I declare,' said Mrs. Mountford, 'there is *that* Mr. Douglas with Charley Ashley! What am I to do? I am sure it is not Willie—he is taller and bigger, and has a different appearance altogether. You cannot expect me, Anne, to meet anyone whom papa disapproves. What shall I do? Run, Rose, and tell Saymore; but of course Charley will not knock at the door like an ordinary visitor—he will come straight here. I have always thought these familiarities should not have been permitted. They will come straight here, though they know he has been sent away and forbidden the house.'

‘He has never been forbidden the house,’ cried Anne indignantly. ‘I hope, mamma, you will not be so uncivil as to refuse to say good-bye to Mr. Douglas. He is going away.’

‘Forbidden the house!’ cried Rose, her eyes opening up like two great O’s. ‘Then it is true!’

‘You had better go away at least, if I must stay,’ said Mrs. Mountford in despair. ‘Rosie, run indoors and stay in the drawing-room till he is gone. It would be in far better taste, Anne, and more dutiful, if you were to go too.’

Anne did not say a word, partly, no doubt, in determined resistance, but partly because just then her voice had failed her, the light was swimming in her eyes, and the air seemed to be full of pairs of dark figures approaching from every different way.

‘Run indoors! why should I?’ said Rose. ‘He can’t do any harm to me; besides, I like Mr. Douglas. Why shouldn’t he come and say good-bye? It would be very uncivil of him if he didn’t, after being so much here.’

‘That is just what I am always saying; you have them constantly here, and then you are surprised when things happen,’ cried Mrs. Mountford, wringing her hands. ‘Anne, if you have any feeling you ought to take your sister away.’

Rose’s eyes grew rounder and rounder. ‘Was it *me* he was in love with, then?’ she asked, not without reason. But by this time it was too late for anyone to run away, as the young men were already making their way across the flower-garden, and could see every movement the ladies made.

‘Sit down, sit down, if it must be so,’ said Mrs. Mountford, ‘and for heaven’s sake let us have no scene; look at least as if it were a common call and meant nothing—that is the only thing to do now.’ ‘How d’ye do, how d’ye do, Charley,’ she said, waving her hand in friendly salutation; ‘was there ever

such a lovely day? Come and sit down; it is too fine for a game. Is that Mr. Douglas you have with you? I was quite blinded with the sun this morning, I can't get it out of my eyes. How do you do?—you will excuse my looking surprised; I thought I heard that you had gone away.'

'Not yet,' he said; 'I hope you did not think me so little grateful for all your kindness as not to make my acknowledgments before leaving the parish. I have lingered longer than I ought to have done, but every happiness must come to an end, and I am bound for Beeton this afternoon to catch the Scotch mail to-night.'

Mrs. Mountford made him a little bow, by way of showing that her interest in this was no more than politeness demanded, and returned to the curate, to whom she was not generally so gracious. 'I hope your father is well,' she said; 'and Willie, where is Willie? It is not often he fails. When we saw you crossing the park just now I made sure it was Willie that was with you. I suppose we shall not have him much longer. He should not disappoint his friends like this.'

'I fear,' said Douglas ('thrusting himself in again; so ill-bred, when he could see I meant to snub him,' Mrs. Mountford said), 'that Willie's absence is my fault. He likes to have his brother to himself, and I don't blame him. However, I am so soon to leave the coast clear! If anything could have made it more hard to turn one's back upon Mount it would be leaving it on such a day. Fancy going from this paradise of warmth and sunshine to the cold North!'

'To Scotland?' cried Rose; 'that's just what I should like to do. You may call this paradise if you like, but it's dull. Paradise would be dull always, don't you think, with nothing happening. To be sure, there's Lady Meadowlands' fête; but

one knows exactly what that will be—at least, almost exactly,’ Rose added, brightening a little, and feeling that a little opening was left for fate.

‘Let us hope it will be as different as possible from what you expect. I have known garden-parties turn out so that one was not in the least like another,’ said Douglas smilingly, accepting the transfer to Rose which Mrs. Mountford’s too apparent snub made necessary. Anne, for her part, did not say a word; she sat quite still in the low basket-chair, scarcely venturing to look up, listening to the tones of his voice and the smile which seemed to pervade his words with that strange half-stunned, half-happy sensation which precedes a parting. Yes, it was happiness still to feel him there, and recognise every distinctive sound of the voice which had awoken her heart. Was there no way of stopping this flying moment, arresting it, so that it should last, or coming to an end in it, which is the suggested sentiment of all perfection? She sat as in a dream, longing to make it last, yet impatient that it should be over; wondering how it was to end, and whether any words more important than these might pass between them still. They had taken farewell of each other under the Beeches. This postscript was almost more than could be borne—intolerable, yet sweet. The voices went on, while the scene turned round and round with Anne, the background of the flowers confusing her eyes, and the excitement mounting to her head. At last, before they had been a moment there, she thought—though it was half an hour—the dark figures had risen up again and hands were being held out. Then she felt her dress twitched, and ‘Let us walk to the end of the garden with them,’ said Rose. This made a little commotion, and Anne in her dream felt Mrs. Mountford’s expostulation—‘Girls!’ in a horrified

undertone, 'what can you be thinking of? Rosie, are you crazy? ANNE!'

This last was almost in a shriek of excitement. But Rose was far too much used to her own way to pay any attention. 'Come along,' she said, linking her fingers in her sister's. Anne, who was the leader in everything, followed for the first time in her life.

The garden was sweet with all manner of autumn flowers, banks of mignonette and heliotrope perfuming the air, and red geraniums blazing in the sunshine—all artificial in their formal beds, just as this intercourse was artificial, restrained by the presence of spectators and the character of the scene. By-and-by, however, Rose untwined her hand from her sister's. 'There is no room to walk so many abreast; go on with Mr. Douglas, Anne; I have something to say to Charley,' the girl cried. She was curious, tingling to her fingers' ends with a desire to know all about it. She turned her round eyes upon Charley with an exciting look of interrogation as soon as the other pair had gone on before. Poor Ashley had drooped his big head; he would have turned his back if he could to give them the benefit of this last moment, but he felt that he could not be expected not to feel it. And as for satisfying the curiosity of this inquisitive imp, whose eyes grew bigger and bigger every moment! he dropped his nice brown beard upon his bosom, and sighed, and slightly shook his head. 'Tell me what it means, or I'll tell mamma you're helping them,' whispered Rose.

'Can't you see what it means?' said the curate, with a glance, she thought, of contempt. What did she know about it? A blush of humiliation at her own ignorance flew over Rose.

'I owe your little sister something for this,' said Douglas, under his breath. 'Once more we two against the world, Anne!'

'Not against the world: everything helps us,

'Cosmo. I did not think I could even venture to look at you, and now we can say good-bye again.'

His fingers twined into hers among the folds of her gown, as Rose's had done a minute before. They could say good-bye again, but they had no words. They moved along together slowly, not walking that they knew of, carried softly as by a wave of supreme emotion; then, after another moment, Anne felt the landscape slowly settling, the earth and the sky getting back into their places, and she herself coming down by slow gyrations to earth again. She was standing still at the corner of the garden, with once more two dark figures upon the white road, but this time not approaching—going away.

'Tell me about it, tell me all about it, Anne. I did it on purpose; I wanted to see how you would behave. You just behaved exactly like other people, and shook hands with him the same as I did. I will stand your friend with papa and everybody if you will tell me all about it, Anne.'

Mrs. Mountford also was greatly excited; she came sailing down upon them with her parasol expanded and fanning herself as she walked. 'I never had such a thing to do,' she said; 'I never had such an awkward encounter in my life. It is not that I have any dislike to the man, he has always been very civil; though I must say, Anne, that I think, instead of coming, it would have been better taste if he had sent a note to say good-bye. And if you consider that I had not an idea what to say to him! and that I was in a state of mind all the time, saying to myself, "Goodness gracious! if papa should suddenly walk round the corner, what should we all do?" I looked for papa every moment all the time. People always do come if there is any special reason for not wanting them. However, I hope it is all over now, and that you will not expose us to such risks any more.'

Anne made no reply to either of her companions. She stole away from them as soon as possible, to subdue the high beating of her own heart, and come down to the ordinary level. No, she was not likely to encounter any such risks again; the day was over and with it the last cake of the feast: the black bread of every day was all that now furnished forth the tables. A kind of dull quiet fell upon Mount and all the surrounding country. The clouds closed round and hung low. People seemed to speak in whispers. It was a quiet that whispered of fate, and in which the elements of storm might be lurking. But still it cannot be said that the calm was unhappy. The light had left the landscape, but only for the moment. The banquet was over, but there were fresh feasts to come. Everything fell back into the old conditions, but nothing was as it had been. The world was the same, yet changed in every particular. Without any convulsion, or indeed any great family disturbance, how did this happen unsuspected? Everything in heaven and earth was different, though all things were the same.

CHAPTER VII.

CROSS-EXAMINATION.

THE change that is made in a quiet house in the country when the chief source of life and emotion is closed for one or other of the inhabitants is such a thing as 'was never said in rhyme.' There may be nothing tragical, nothing final about it, but it penetrates through every hour and every occupation. The whole scheme of living seems changed, although there may be no change in any habit. It is, indeed, the very sameness and unity of the life, the way in which every little custom survives, in which the feet

follow the accustomed round, the eyes survey the same things, the very same words come to the lips that make the difference so palpable. This was what Anne Mountford felt now. To outward seeming her existence was absolutely as before. It was not an exciting life, but it had been a happy one. Her mind was active and strong, and capable of sustaining itself. Even in the warm and soft stagnation of her home, her life had been like a running stream always in movement, turning off at unexpected corners, flowing now in one direction, now another, making unexpected leaps and variations of its own. She had the wholesome love of new things and employments which keeps life fresh ; and there had scarcely been a week in which she had not had some new idea or other, quickly copied and turned into matter-of-fact prose by her little sister. This had made Mount lively even when there was nothing going on. And for months together nothing did go on at Mount. It was not a great country house filled with fashionable visitors in the autumn and winter, swept clean of all its inhabitants in spring. The Mountfords stayed at home all the year round, unless it were at the fall of the leaf, when sometimes they would go to Brighton, sometimes at the very dearest season to town. They had nobody to visit them except an occasional old friend belonging to some other county family, who understood the kind of life and lived the same at home. On these occasions if the friend were a little superior they would ask Lord and Lady Meadowlands to dinner, but if not they would content themselves with the clergymen of the two neighbouring parishes, and the Woodheads, whose house was not much more than a villa. Lately, since the girls grew up, the 'game' in the afternoon which brought young visitors to the house in summer had added to the mild amusements of this life ; but the young people who came were always the same, and so were the old people in the village,

who had to be visited, and to have flannels prepared for them against Christmas, and their savings taken care of. When a young man 'went wrong,' or a girl got into trouble, it made the greatest excitement in the parish. 'Did you hear that Sally Lawson came home to her mother on Saturday, sent away from her place at a moment's notice?' or: 'Old Gubbins's boy has enlisted. Did you ever hear anything so sad—the one the rector took so much pains with, and helped on so in his education?' It was very sad for the Gubbinses and Lawsons, but it was a great god-send to the parish. And when Lady Meadowlands' mother, old Lady Prayrey Poule, went and married, actually *married* at sixty, it did the very county, not to speak of those parishes which had the best right to the news, good. This was the way in which life passed at Mount. And hitherto Anne had supplemented and made it lively with a hundred pursuits of her own. Even up to the beginning of August, when Mr. Douglas, who had left various reminiscences behind him of his Christmas visit, came back—having enjoyed himself so much on the previous occasion, as he said—Anne had continued in full career of those vigorous fancies which kept her always interested. She had sketched indefatigably all the spring and early summer, growing almost fanatical about the tenderness of the shadows and the glory of the lights. Then finding the cottages, which were so picturesque, and figured in so many sketches, to be too wretched for habitation, though they were inhabited, she had rushed into building, into plans, and elevations, and measurements, which it was difficult to force Mr. Mountford's attention to, but which were evidently a step in the right direction. But on Douglas's second arrival these occupations had been unconsciously intermitted, they had been pushed aside by a hundred little engagements which the Ashleys had managed to make for the entertainment of their friend. There

had been several pic-nics, and a party at the rectory—the first since Mrs. Ashley's death—and a party at the Woodheads', the only other people in the parish capable of entertaining. Then there had been an expedition to the Castle, which the Meadowlands, on being informed that Charley Ashley's friend was anxious to see it, graciously combined with a luncheon and a 'game' in the afternoon. And then there was the game at Mount on all the other afternoons. Who could wonder, as Mrs. Mountford said, that something had come of it? The young men had been allowed to come continually about the house. No questions had been asked, no conditions imposed upon them. 'Thou shalt not make love to thy entertainer's daughter' had not been written up, as it ought to have been, on the lodge. And now, all this was over. Like a scene at the theatre, opening up, gliding off with nothing but a little jar of the carpentry, this momentous episode was concluded and the magician gone. And Anne Mountford returned to the existence—which was exactly as it had been of old.

The other people did not see any difference in it; and to her the wonderful thing was that there was no difference in it. She had been in paradise, caught up, and had seen unspeakable things; but now that she had dropped down again, though for a moment the earth seemed to jar and tingle under her feet as they came in contact with it, there was no difference. Her plans were there just the same, and the question still to settle about how far the pig-sty must be distant from the house; and old Saymore re-emerged to view making up his bouquets for the vases, and holding his head on one side as he looked at them, to see how they 'composed;' and Mrs. Worth, who all this time had been making dresses and trying different shades to find out what would best set off Miss Rose's complexion. They had been

going on like the figures on the barrel-organ, doing the same thing all the time—never varying or changing. Anne looked at them all with a kind of doleful amusement, gyrating just in the old way, making the same little bobs and curtseys. They had no want of interest or occupation, always moving quite contentedly to the old tunes, turning round and round. Mr. Mountford sat so many hours in his business-room, walked one day, rode the next for needful exercise, sat just so long in the drawing-room in the evening. His wife occupied herself an hour every morning with the cook, took her wool-work at eleven, and her drive at half-past two, except when the horses were wanted. Anne came back to it all, with a little giddiness from her expedition to the empyrean, and looked at the routine with a wondering amusement. She had never known before how like clockwork it was. Now her own machinery, always a little eccentric, declined to acknowledge that key: some sort of new motive power had got into her, which disturbed the action of the other. She began again with a great many jerks and jars, a great many times: and then would stop and look at all the others in their unconscious dance, moving round and round, and laugh to herself with a little awe of her discovery. Was this what the scientific people meant by the automatic theory, she wondered, being a young woman who read everything; but then in a law which permitted no exceptions, how was it that she herself had got out of gear?

Rose, who followed her sister in everything, wished very much to follow her in this too. She had always managed to find out about every new impulse before, and catch the way of it, though the impulse itself was unknown to her. She gave Anne no rest till she had ascertained about this too. ‘Tell us what it is like,’ she said, with a hundred repeti-

tions. 'How did you first find out that he cared for you? What put it into your head? Was it anything he said that made you think *that*? As it is probably something that one time or another will happen to me too, I think it is dreadful of you not to tell me. Had you never found it out till he told you? and what did he say? Did he ask you all at once if you would marry him? or did it all come on by degrees?'

'How do you think I can tell?' said Anne; 'it is not a thing you can put into words. I think it all came on by degrees.'

But this, though it was her own formula, did not satisfy Rose. 'I am sure you could tell me a great deal more if you only would,' she cried; 'what did he *say*? Now, *that* you can't help remembering; you must know what he said. Did he tell you he was in love with you, or ask you straight off to marry him? You can't have forgotten that—it is not so very long ago.'

'But, Rosie, I could not tell you. It is not the words, it is not anything that could be repeated. A woman should hear that for the first time,' said Anne, with shy fervour, turning away her head to hide the blush, 'when it is said to herself.'

'A woman! Then you call yourself a woman now? I am only a girl; is that one of the things that show?' asked Rose, gravely, in pursuit of her inquiry. 'Well, then, you ought surely to let me know what kind of a thing it is. Are you so very fond of him as people say in books? are you always thinking about him? Anne, it is dreadfully mean of you to keep it all to yourself. Tell me one thing: when he said it first, did he go down upon his knees?'

'What nonsense you are talking!' said Anne, with a burst of laughter. Then there rose before her in sweet confusion a recollection of various

moments in which Rose, always matter-of-fact, might have described her lover as on his knees. 'You don't know anything about it,' she said, 'and I can't tell you anything about it. I don't know myself, Rosie; it was all like a dream.'

'It is you who are talking nonsense,' said Rose. 'How could it be like a dream? In a dream you wake up and it is all over; but it is not a bit over with you. Well, then, *after*, how did it feel, Anne? Was he always telling you you were pretty? Did he call you "dear," and "love," and all that sort of thing? It would be so *very* easy to tell me—and I do so want to know.'

'Do you remember, Rose,' said Anne, with a little solemnity, 'how we used to wish for a brother? We thought we could tell him everything, and ask him questions as we never could do to papa, and yet it would be quite different from telling each other. He would know better; he would be able to tell us quantities of things, and yet he would understand what we meant too.'

'I remember you used to wish for it,' said Rose, honestly, 'and that it would have been such a very good thing for the entail.'

'Then,' said Anne, with fervour, it is a little like that—like what we thought that would be. One feels that one's heart is running over with things to say. One wants to tell him everything, what happened when one was a little girl, and all the nonsense that has ever been in one's mind. I told him even about that time I was shut up in the blue room, and how frightened I was. Everything! it does not matter if it is a trifle. One knows he will not think it a trifle. Exactly—at least almost exactly, like what it would be to have a brother—but yet with a difference too,' Anne added, after a pause, blushing, she could scarcely tell why.

‘Ah!’ said Rose, with great perspicacity, ‘but the difference is just what I want to know.’

The oracle, however, made no response, and in despair the pertinacious questioner changed the subject a little. ‘If you will not tell me what he said, nor what sort of a thing it is, you may at least let me know one thing—what are you going to do?’

‘Nothing,’ said Anne, softly. She stood with her hands clasped before her, looking with some wistfulness into the blueness of the distant air, as if into the future, shaking her head a little, acknowledging to herself that she could not see into it. ‘Nothing—so far as I know.’

‘Nothing! are you going to be in love, and engaged, and all that, and yet do *nothing*? I know papa will not consent—mamma told me. She said you would have to give up everything if you married him; and that it would be a good thing for——’

Here Rose paused, gave her head a little shake to banish the foolish words with which she had almost betrayed the confidence of her mother’s communication, and reddened with alarm to think how near she had been to letting it all out.

‘I am not going to—marry,’ said Anne, in spite of herself, a little coldly, though she scarcely knew why, ‘if that is what you want to know.’

‘Then what,’ said Rose, majestically, ‘do you mean to do?’

The elder sister laughed a little. It was at the serious pertinacity of her questioner, who would not take an answer. ‘I never knew you so curious before,’ she said. ‘One does not need to do anything all at once——’

‘But what are you going to *do*?’ said Rose. ‘I never knew you so dull, Anne. Dear me, there are a great many things to do besides getting married. Has he just gone away for good, and is there an end of it? Or is he coming back again, or going to

write to you, or what is going to happen? I know it can't be going to end like that; or what was the use of it at all?' the girl said, with some indignation. It was Rose's office to turn into prose all Anne's romancings. She stopped short as they were walking, in the heat of indignant reason, and faced her sister, with natural eloquence, as all oratorical talkers do.

'It is not going to end,' said Anne, a shade of sternness coming over her face. She did not pause even for a moment, but went on softly with her abstracted look. Many a time before in the same abstraction had she escaped from her sister's questions; but Rose had never been so persistent as now.

'If you are not going to do anything, and it is not to end, I wonder what is going to happen,' said Rose. 'If it were me, I should know what I was to do.'

They were walking up and down on the green terrace where so many games had been played. It was getting almost too dark for the lime avenue when their talk had begun. The day had faded so far that the red of the geraniums had almost gone out; and light had come into the windows of the drawing-room, and appeared here and there over the house. The season had changed all in a day—a touch of autumn was in the air, and mist hung in all the hollows. The glory of the year was over; or so at least Anne thought.

'And another thing,' said Rose; 'are you going to tell anybody? Mamma says I am not to tell; but do you think it is right to go to the Meadowlands' party, and go on talking and laughing with everybody just the same, and you an engaged girl? Somebody else might fall in love with you! I don't think it is a right thing to do.'

'People have not been in such a hurry to fall in love with me,' said Anne; 'but, Rose, I don't think

this is a subject that mamma would think at all suited for you.'

'Oh, mamma talked to me about it herself; she said she wished you would give it up, Anne. She said it never could come to anything, for papa will never consent.'

'Papa may never consent; but yet it will come to something,' said Anne, with a gleam in her eyes. 'That is enough, Rose; that is enough. I am going in, whatever you may do.'

'But, Anne! just one thing more; if papa does not consent, what *can* you do? Mamma says he could never afford to marry if you had nothing, and you would have nothing if papa refused. It is only *your* money that you would have to marry on; and if you had no money—— So what *could* you do?'

'I wish, when mamma speaks of my affairs, she would speak to me,' said Anne, with natural indignation. She was angry and indignant; and the words made, in spite of herself, a painful commotion within her. Money! what had money to do with it? She had felt the injustice, the wrong of her father's threat; but it had not occurred to her that this could really have any effect upon her love; and though she had been annoyed to find that Cosmo would not treat the subject with seriousness, or believe in the gravity of Mr. Mountford's menace, still she had been entirely satisfied that his apparent carelessness was the right way for him to consider it. He thought it of no importance, of course. He made jokes about it; laughed at it; beguiled her out of her gravity on the subject. Of course! what was it to him whether she ~~was~~ was rich or poor; what did Cosmo care? So long as she loved him, was not that all he was thinking of? What would she have minded had she been told that *he* had nothing? Not one straw—not one farthing! But when this little prose personage, with her more practical views

of the question, rubbed against Anne, there did come to her, quite suddenly, a little enlightenment. It was like one chill, but by no means depressing, ray of daylight bursting in through a crevice into the land of dreams. If he had no money, and she no money, what then? Then, notwithstanding all generosity and nobleness of affection, money certainly would have something to do with it. It would count among the things to be taken into consideration; count dolefully, in so far as it would keep them apart; yet count with stimulating force as a difficulty to be surmounted, an obstacle to be got the better of. When Mrs. Mountford put her head out of the window, and called them to come in out of the falling dews, Anne went upstairs very seriously, and shut the door of her room, and sat down in her favourite chair to think it out. Fathers and mothers are supposed to have an objection to long engagements; but girls, at all events at the outset of their career, do not entertain the same objection. Anne was still in the dreamy condition of youthful rapture, transported out of herself by the new light that had come into the world, so that the indispensable sequence of marriage did not present itself to her as it does to the practical-minded. It was a barrier of fact with which, in the meantime, she had nothing to do. She was not disappointed or depressed, because *that* was not the matter in question. It would come in time, no doubt, as the afternoon follows the morning, and autumn summer, but who would change the delights of the morning for the warmer, steady glory of three o'clock? though that also is very good in its way. She was quite resigned to the necessity of waiting, and not being married all at once. The contingency neither alarmed nor distressed her. Its immediate result was one which, indeed, most courses of thought produced in her mind at the present moment. If I had but thought

of that, she said to herself, before he went away! She would have liked to talk over the money question with Cosmo; to discuss it in all its bearings; to hear him say how little it mattered, and to plan how they could do without it; not absolutely without it, of course; but Anne's active mind leaped at once at the thought of those systems of domestic economy which would be something quite new to study, which had not yet tempted her, but which would now have an interest such as no study ever had. And, on his side, there could be no doubt that the effort would be similar; in all likelihood even now (if he had thought of it) he was returning with enthusiasm to his work, saying to himself, 'I have Anne to work for; I have my happiness to win.' 'He could never afford to marry if *you* had nothing. It is only your money that you could marry on; and if you had no money, what could you do?' Anne smiled to herself at Rose's wisdom; nay, laughed in the silence, in the dark, all by herself, with an outburst of private mirth. Rose—prose, she said to herself, as she had said often before. How little that little thing knew! but how could she know any better, being so young, and with no experience? The thrill of high exhilaration which had come to her own breast at the thought of this unperceived difficulty—the still higher impulse that no doubt had been given to Cosmo, putting spurs to his intellect, making impossibilities possible—a child like Rose could not understand those mysteries. By-and-by Anne reminded herself that, as the love of money was the root of all evil, so the want of it had been, not only no harm, but the greatest good. Painters, poets, people of genius of every kind had been stimulated by this wholesome prick. Had Shakespeare been rich? She threw her head aloft with a smile of conscious energy, and capacity, and power. No money! That would be the best way to

make a life worth living. She faced all heroisms, all sacrifices, with a smile, and in a moment had gone through all the labours and privations of years. He, working so many hours at a stretch, bursting upon the world with the eloquence which was inspired by love and necessity; she, making a shabby room into a paradise of content, working for him with her own happy hands, carrying him through every despondency and difficulty. Good heavens! could any little idiot suppose that to settle down on a good income and never have any trouble would be half so delightful as this? Anne used strong language in the swelling of her breast.

It made her laugh with a little ridicule of herself, and a half sense that, if Rose's tendency was prose, hers might perhaps be heroics, when it occurred to her that Cosmo, instead of rushing back to his work, had only intended to catch the Scotch mail, and that he was going to the Highlands to shoot; while she herself was expected in Mrs. Worth's room to have her dress tried on for the Meadowlands' party. But, after all, what did that matter? There was no hurry; it was still the Long Vacation, in which no man can work, and in the meantime there was no economy for her to begin upon.

The maid whom she and Rose shared between them, and whose name was Keziah, came to the door to call her when she had reached this point.

'Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Anne,' she said; 'I didn't know you had no lights.'

'They were quite unnecessary, thank you,' said Anne, rising up out of her meditations, calmed, yet with all the force of this new stimulus to her thoughts.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEADOWLANDS' PARTY.

It was a very large party—collected from all the quarters of England, or even it may be said of the globe, seeing there was a Russian princess and an American literary gentleman among the lists of the guests, as well as embracing the whole county, and everybody that had any claim to be affiliated into society there. Lady Meadowlands made a very liberal estimate of what could be called the society of the county—too liberal an estimate, many people thought. The clergy, everyone knows, must be present in force at every such function, and all their belongings, down to the youngest daughter who is out; but such a rule surely ought not to apply to country practitioners; and even to the brewer at Hunston, who, though he was rich, was nobody. Upon that point almost everybody made a stand, and it is to be feared that Mrs. and Miss Brewer did not enjoy themselves at the Castle. But these were drawbacks not fully realised till afterwards. The people who were aggrieved by the presence of the brewer's family were those who themselves were not very sure of their standing, and who felt it was 'no compliment' to be asked when such persons were also acknowledged as within the mystic ring. Dr. Peacock's wife and Miss Woodhead were the ladies who felt it most; though poor Mr. Peacock himself was considered by some to be quite as great a blot. All the roads in the neighbourhood of the Castle were as gay as if there had been a fair going on. The village turned out bodily to see the carriages and horses of the quality; though these fine people themselves were perhaps less admired by the rustics than the beautiful tall footman in powder who had come from

town with Lady Prayrey Poule. But as every new arrival drove up, the excitement rose to a high pitch ; even the soberest of people are moved by the sensation of multitude, the feeling of forming part of a distinguished crowd. And the day was fine, with a sunny haze hanging about the distance, reddening the sun and giving a warm indistinctness to the sky. The grounds at Meadowlands were fine, and the park very extensive. The house was a modern and handsome house, and at some distance from it stood an old castle in ruins, which was the greatest attraction of the place. Upon the lawns a great many 'games' were going on. I have already said that I have no certainty as to whether the games were croquet or lawn-tennis, not knowing or remembering when the one period ended and the other began. But they were enough in either case to supply lively groups of young persons in pretty dresses, and afford a little gentle amusement to the lookers-on, especially when those lookers-on were the parents or relations of the performers. The Mountford party held a half-way place in the hierarchy of Lady Meadowlands' guests. They were, as has been said, a very old family, though their want of wealth had for some time made them less desirable neighbours than it is pleasant for members of an old family to be. And though the girls might, as was generally said, now 'marry anybody,' and consequently rise to any distinction, Mr. and Mrs. Mountford were not the kind of people whom it would have afforded the Princess Comatosky any pleasure to have presented to her, or who would have been looked upon as fine types of the English landed gentry by Mr. Greenwood, the American. But, on the other hand, they occupied a position very different from that of the rank and file, the people who, but for their professional position, would have had no right to appear in the heaven of county society at all. And Anne and Rose being pretty, and

having the hope, one of a very good fortune, the other of a reasonable *dot*, were really in the first rank of young ladies without any drawbacks at all. Perhaps the reader will like to know what they wore on this interesting occasion. They were not dressed alike, as sisters so often are, without regard to individuality. After very serious thought, Mrs. Worth had decided that the roses of Rose wanted subduing, and had dressed her in Tussore silk, of the warm natural grass colour; while Anne, always much more easy to dress, as that artist said, was in an ivory-tinted cashmere, very plain and simple, which did all that was wanted for her slim and graceful figure. Rose had flouncelets and puffings beyond mortal power to record. Anne was better without the foreign aid of ornament. I don't pretend to be so uninstructed as to require to describe a lady's dress as only of 'some soft white material.' It was cashmere, and why shouldn't one say so? For by this time a little autumn chill had set in, and even in the middle of the day it was no longer overpoweringly warm.

It is needless to say that the Ashleys were also there. These young men, though so constantly with the girls at home, had to relinquish their place a little when abroad, and especially when in more exalted company. Then it became apparent that Charley and Willie, though great friends, were not in any way of the same importance as Anne and Rose. They were not handsome, for one thing, or very clever or amusing—but only Charley and Willie Ashley, which was a title for friendship, but not for social advancement. And especially were they separated from Anne, whose climax of social advancement came when she was presented to the Princess Comatosky, who admired her eyes and her dress, the latter being a most unusual compliment. There was a fashionable party assembled in the house besides all

the county people, and the Miss Mountfords were swept away into this brilliant sphere and introduced to everybody. Rose was a little abashed at first, and looked back with anxious eyes at her mother, who was seated on the edge of that higher circle, but not within it; but she soon got confidence. Anne, however, who was not so self-possessed, was excited by the fine company. Her complexion, which was generally pale, took a faint glow, her eyes became so bright that the old Russian lady grew quite enthusiastic. 'I like a handsome girl,' she said; 'bring her back once more to speak to me.' Mr. Greenwood, the American, was of the same opinion. He was not at all like the American author of twenty years ago, before we knew the species. He spoke as little through his nose as the best of us, and his manners were admirable. He was more refinedly English than an Englishman, more fastidious in his opposition to display and vulgarity, and his horror of loud tones and talk; and there was just a *nuance* of French politeness in his look and air. He was as exquisitely polite to the merest commoner as if he had been a crowned head, but at the same time it was one of the deepest certainties of his heart that he was only quite at home among people of title and in a noble house. Not all people of title: Mr. Greenwood had the finest discrimination and preferred at all times the best. But even he was pleased with Anne. 'Miss Mountford is very inexperienced,' he said, in his gentle way; 'she does not know how to drop into a conversation or to drop out of it. Perhaps that is too fine an art to learn at twenty: but she is more like a lady than anyone else I see here.' Lady Meadowlands, like most of the fashionable world, had a great respect for Mr. Greenwood's opinion. 'That is so much from you!' she said gratefully; 'and if you give her the advantage of seeing a little of you, it will do dear Anne the greatest good.' Mr. Green-

wood shook his head modestly, deprecating the possibility of conferring so much advantage, but he felt in his heart that it was true.

Thus Anne, for the first time in her life, had what may be called a veritable *succès*. We may perhaps consider the word naturalised by this time and call it a success. There was a certain expansion and brightening of all her faculties consequent upon the new step she had taken in life, of which no one had been conscious before, and the state of opposition in which she found herself to her family had given her just as much emancipation as became her, and gave force to all her attractions. She was not beautiful perhaps, nor would she have satisfied a critical examination; but both her face and figure had a certain nobility of line which impressed the spectator. Tall and light, and straight and strong, with nothing feeble or drooping about her, the girlish shyness to which she had been subject was not becoming to Anne. Rose, who was not shy, might have drooped her head as much as she pleased, but it did not suit her sister. And the fact that she had judged for herself, had chosen her own path, and made up her own mind, and more or less defied Fate and her father, had given just the inspiration it wanted to her face. She was shy still, which gave her a light and shade, an occasional gleam of timidity and alarm, which pleased the imagination. 'I told you Anne Mountford would come out if she had the chance,' Lady Meadowlands said to her lord. 'What is this nonsense I hear about an engagement? Is there an engagement? What folly! before she has seen anybody or had any chance, as you say,' said Lord Meadowlands to his lady. They were interested in Anne, and she was beyond question the girl who did them most credit of all their country neighbours, which also told for something in its way.

The Rev. Charles Ashley, in his most correct

clerical coat, and a general starch of propriety about him altogether unlike the ease of his ordinary appearance, looked on from afar at this brilliant spectacle, but had not much share in it. Had there been anybody there who could have been specially of use to Charley—the new bishop for instance, who did not yet know his clergy, or the patron of a good living, or an official concerned with the Crown patronage, anyone who could have lent him a helping hand in his profession—no doubt Lady Meadowlands would have taken care to introduce the curate and speak a good word for him. But there being nobody of the kind present, Charley was left with the mob to get up a game on his own account and amuse the young ladies who were unimportant, who made up the mass of the assembly. And the young Ashleys both accepted this natural post, and paid such harmless attentions as were natural to the wives and daughters of other clergymen, and the other people whom they knew. They had no desire to be introduced to the Princess, or the other great persons who kept together, not knowing the county. But, while Willie threw himself with zeal into the amusements and the company provided, the curate kept his eyes upon the one figure, always at a distance, which was the chief point of interest for him.

‘I want to speak to Anne,’ he said to Rose, who was less inaccessible, who had not had so great a success; ‘if you see Anne, will you tell her I want to speak to her?’

‘Anne, Charley wants to speak to you,’ Rose said, as soon as she had an opportunity, in the hearing of everybody; and Anne turned and nodded with friendly assent over the chairs of the old ladies. But she did not make any haste to ask what he wanted. She took it with great ease, as not calling for any special attention. There would be abundant

opportunities of hearing what Charley had to say. On the way home she could ask him what he wanted ; or while they were waiting for the carriage ; or even to-morrow, when he was sure to come to talk over the party, would no doubt be time enough. It would be something about the schools, or some girl or boy who wanted a place, or some old woman who was ill. ' Anne, Charley says he *must* speak to you,' said Rose again. But it was not till after she had received a third message that Anne really gave any attention to the call. ' Cannot he tell you what he wants?—I will come as soon as I can,' she said. Perhaps the curate was not so much distressed as he thought he was by her inattention. He watched her from a distance with his hands in his pockets. When he was accosted by other clergymen and country friends who were wandering about he replied to them, and even carried on little conversations, with his eyes upon her. Something grim and humorous, a kind of tender spitefulness, was in the look with which he regarded her. If she only knew ! But it was her own fault if she did not know, not his. It gave him a kind of pleasure to see how she lingered, to perceive that her mind was fully occupied, and that she never divined the nature of his business with her. So far as his own action went he had done his duty, but he could not help a half chuckle, quickly suppressed, when he imagined within himself how Douglas would look if he saw how impossible it was to gain Anne's attention. Did that mean, he asked in spite of himself, that after all she was not so much interested ? Charley had felt sure that at the first word Anne would divine. ' I should divine if a note of *hers* was on its way to me,' he said to himself—and it pleased him that she never guessed that a letter from Cosmo was lying safe in the recesses of his pocket. When she came hastily towards him at last, a little breathless and

hurried, and with only a moment to spare, there was no consciousness in Anne's face.

'What is it?' she said—before the Woodheads! She would have said it before anybody, so entirely unsuspecting was she. 'I must go back to the old lady,' she added, with a little blush and smile, pleased in spite of herself by the distinction; 'but Rose told me you wanted me. Tell me what it is.'

He made elaborate signs to her with his eyebrows, and motions recommending precaution with his lips—confounding Anne completely. For poor Charley had heavy eyebrows, and thick lips, and his gestures were not graceful. She stared at him in unfeigned astonishment, and then, amused as well as bewildered, laughed. He enjoyed it all, though he pretended to be disconcerted. She looked as bright as ever, he said to himself. There was no appearance of trouble about her, or of longing uncertainty. She laughed just as of old, with that pleasant ring in the laughter which had always charmed him. The temptation crossed the curate's mind, as she did not seem to want it, as she looked so much like her old self, as she showed no perception of what he had for her, to put the letter down a little deeper in his pocket, and not disturb her calm at all.

'Oh yes,' he said, as if he had suddenly recollected, 'it was something I wanted to show you. Come down this path a little. You seem to be enjoying the party, Anne.'

'Yes, well enough. It is pretty,' she said, glancing over the pretty lawns covered with gaily-dressed groups. 'Are *you* not enjoying yourself? I am so sorry. But you know everybody, or almost everybody here.'

'Except your grand people,' he said, with some malice.

'My grand people! They are all nice whether

they are grand or not, and the old lady is very funny. She has all kinds of strange old ornaments and crosses and charms mixed together. What is it. Charley? you are looking so serious, and I must go back as soon as I am able. Tell me what it is.'

'Can't you divine what it is?' he said, with an air half reproachful, half triumphant.

She looked at him astonished; and then, suddenly taking fire from his look, her face kindled into colour and expectation and wondering eagerness. Poor curate! he had been pleased with her slowness to perceive, but he was not so pleased now when her whole countenance lighted under his eyes. He in his own person could never have brought any such light into her face. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then stood eager, facing him with the words arrested on her very lips.

'Is it a message from——' She paused, and a wave of scarlet came over her face up to her hair. Poor Charley Ashley! There was no want of the power to divine now. His little pleasant spitefulness, and his elation over what he considered her indifference, died in the twinkling of an eye.

'It is more than a message,' he said, thinking what an ass he was to doubt her, and what a traitor to be delighted by that doubt. 'It is—a letter, Anne.'

She did not say anything—the colour grew deeper and deeper upon her face, the breath came quickly from her parted lips, and without a word she put out her hand.

Yes, of course, that was all—to give it her, and be done with it—what had he to do more with the incident? No honourable man would have wished to know more. To give it to her and to withdraw. It was nothing to him what was in the letter. He had no right to criticise. In the little bitterness

which this feeling produced in him he wanted to say what, indeed, he had felt all along: that though he did not mind *once*, it would not suit his office to be the channel through which their communications were to flow. He *wanted* to say this now, whereas before he had only felt that he ought to say it; but in either case, under the look of Anne's eyes, poor Charley could not say it. He put his hand in his pocket to get the letter, and of course he forgot in which pocket he had put it, and then became red and confused, as was natural. Anne for her part did not change her attitude. She stood with that look of sudden eagerness in her face—a blush that went away, leaving her quite pale, and then came back again—and her hand held out for the letter. How hot, how wretched he got, as he plunged into one pocket after another, with her eyes looking him through! 'Anne,' he stammered, when he found it at last, 'I beg your pardon—I am very glad—to be of—any use. I like to do anything, anything for you! but—I am a clergyman——'

'Oh, go away—please go away,' said Anne. She had evidently paid no attention to what he said. She put him away even, unconsciously, with her hand. 'Don't let anyone come,' she said, walking away from him round the next corner of the path. Then he heard her tear open the envelope. She had not paid any attention to his offer of service, but she had made use of it all the same, taking it for granted. The curate turned his back to her and walked a few steps in the other direction. She had told him not to let anyone come, and he would not let anyone come. He would have walked any intruders backward out of the sacred seclusion. Yet there he stood dumbfounded, wounded, wondering why it was that Cosmo should have so much power and he so little. Cosmo got everything he wanted. To think that Anne's face should change

like that at his mere name, nay, at the merest suggestion of him!—it was wonderful. But it was hard too.

Anne's heart was in her mouth as she read the letter. She did not take time to think about it, nor how it came there, nor of any unsuitableness in the way it reached her. It was to ask how they were to correspond, whether he was to be permitted to write to her. 'I cannot think why we did not settle this before I left,' Cosmo said; 'I suppose the going away looked so like dying that nothing beyond it, except coming back again, seemed any alleviation.' But this object of the letter did not strike Anne at first. She was unconscious of everything except the letter itself, and those words which she had never seen on paper in handwriting before. She had read something like it in books. Nothing but books could be the parallel of what was happening to her. 'My dear and only love,' that was in a poem somewhere Anne was certain, but Cosmo did not quote it out of any poem. It was the natural language; that was how she was to be addressed now, like Juliet. She had come to that state and dignity all at once, in a moment, without any doing of hers. She stood alone, unseen, behind the great tuft of bushes, while the curate kept watch lest anyone should come to disturb her, and all the old people sat round unseen, chatting and eating ices, while the young ones fluttered about the lawns. Nobody suspected with what a sudden, intense, and wondering perception of all the emotions she had fallen heir to, she stood under the shadow of the rhododendrons reading her letter; and nobody knew with what a sore but faithful heart the curate stood, turning his back to her, and protected her seclusion. It was a scene that was laughable, comical, pathetic, but pathetic more than all.

This incident coloured the whole scene to Anne,

and gave it its character. She had almost forgotten the very existence of the old Princess when she went back. 'Bring me that girl,' the old lady said, in her excellent English, 'bring me back that girl. She is the one I prefer. All the others they are demoiselles, but this is a woman.' But when Anne was brought back at last the keen old lady saw the difference at once. 'Something has happened,' she said; 'what has happened, my all-beautiful? someone has been making you a proposal of marriage. That comes of your English customs which you approve so much. To me it is intolerable; imagine a man having the permission in society to startle this child with an *emotion* like that.' She pronounced *emotion* and all similar words as if they had been in the French language. Anne protested vainly that no such emotion had fallen to her share. Mr. Greenwood agreed with the Princess, though he did not express himself so frankly. Could it be the curate? he thought, elevating his eyebrows. He was a man of experience, and knew how the most unlikely being is sometimes gifted to produce such an emotion in the fairest bosom.

CHAPTER IX.

COSMO.

It is time to let the reader of this story know who Cosmo Douglas was, whose appearance had made so great a commotion at Mount. He was—nobody. This was a fact that Mr. Mountford had very soon elicited by his inquiries. He did not belong to any known house of Douglasses under the sun. It may be said that there was something fair in Cosmo's frank confession on this point, put perhaps it would be more true to say that it showed the good sense which was certainly one of his characteristics; for

any delusion that he might have encouraged or consented to in this respect must have been found out very shortly, and it would only have been to his discredit to claim good connections which did not belong to him. 'Honesty is the best policy' he had said to himself, and therefore he had been honest. Nevertheless it was a standing mystery to Cosmo that he was nobody. He could not understand it. It had been a trouble to him all his life. How was he inferior to the other people who had good connections? He had received the same kind of education, he had the same kind of habits, he was as much a 'gentleman,' that curious English distinction which means everything and nothing, as any of them. He did not even feel within himself the healthy thrill of opposition with which the lowly born sometimes scorn the supposed superiority of blue blood. He for his part had something in his heart which entirely coincided with that superstition. Instinctively he preferred for himself that his friends should be well born. He had as natural a predilection that way as if his shield held ever so many quarterings; and it was terrible to know that he had no right to any shield at all. In his boyhood he had accepted the crest which his father wore at his watch-chain, and had stamped upon his spoons and forks, with undoubting faith, as if it had descended straight from the Crusaders; and when he had read of the 'dark grey man' in early Scotch history, and of that Lord James who carried Bruce's heart to the Holy Land, there was a swell of pride within him, and he had no doubt that they were his ancestors. But as he grew older it dawned upon Cosmo that his father had assumed the bleeding heart because he found it represented in the old book of heraldry as the cognisance of the Douglasses, and not because he had any hereditary right to it—and, indeed, the fact was that good Mr. Douglas knew no better. He thought

in all simplicity that his name entitled him to the symbol which was connected with the name, and that all those great people so far off from the present day were 'no doubt' his ancestors, though it was too far back to be able to tell.

Mr. Douglas himself was a man of the highest respectability. He was the managing clerk in a solicitor's office, with a good salary, and the entire confidence of his employers. Perhaps he might even have been a partner had he been of a bolder temper ; but he was afraid of responsibility, and had no desire, he said, to assume a different position, or rise in the social scale. That would be for Cosmo, he added, within himself. He had lost his wife at a very early period, when Cosmo was still a child, and upon the boy all his father's hopes were built. He gave him 'every advantage.' For himself he lived very quietly in a house with a garden out Hampstead way, a small house capable of being managed by one respectable woman-servant, who had been with him for years, and a young girl under her, or sometimes a boy, when she could be persuaded to put up with one of these more objectionable creatures. But Cosmo had everything that was supposed to be best for an English young man. He was at Westminster School, and so received into the fraternity of 'public school men,' which is a distinct class in England ; and then he went to the University. When he took his degree he studied for the bar. Both at Oxford and Lincoln's Inn he was 'in for' all his examinations in company with the son of his father's employer ; but it was Cosmo who was the most promising student always, and the most popular man. He had the air and the bearing, the '*je ne sais quoi*' which is supposed to indicate 'family,' though he was of no family. Nothing ever was more perplexing. He could not understand it himself. What was it that made this wonderful difference ? When he

looked at Charley Ashley a smile would sometimes steal over his countenance. In that point of view the prejudice certainly showed its full absurdity. Charley was his retainer, his faithful follower—his dog, in a way. But Mr. Mountford, though he would probably have thought Charley not a suitable match for his daughter, would not have looked upon him with the same puzzled air as on a creature of a different species, with which he regarded the suitor who was nobody. When this contrast struck him, no doubt Cosmo smiled with a little bitterness. Charley had connections among all the little squires of the district. He had an uncle here and there whose name was in some undistinguished list or other—the ‘Gentry of Great Britain’ or some other such bead-roll. But Cosmo had no link at all to the classes who consider themselves the natural masters of the world.

If you will think of it, it was as troublesome and unpleasant a position as could be conceived—to have all that makes a gentleman and to be a gentleman, fully considered and received as such, yet upon close investigation to be found to be nobody, and have all your other qualities ignored in consequence. It was hard—it was a complicating, perplexing grievance, such as could only occur in the most artificial state of society. In the middle ages, if a man ‘rose,’ it was by dint of hard blows, and people were afraid of him. But ‘rising in the world’ had a very different meaning in Cosmo’s case. He had always known what it was to be carefully tended, daintily fed, clothed with the best of clothes—as well as a duke’s son need have been. He had all the books to read which any duke’s son could have set his face to; and though the Hampstead rooms were small, and might have looked poky had there been a family cooped up in them, Cosmo and his father had felt no want of space nor of comfort. Even that little Hampstead house was now a thing of the past. Mr

Douglas had died, though still not much beyond middle age, and Cosmo had his chambers, like any other young barrister, and several clubs, and all the 'advantages' which his father had sworn he should have. He had a little money, and a little practice, and was 'getting on.' If he was not in fashionable society, he was yet in an excellent 'set'—rising barristers, literary people, all rising too, people of reputation, people who suppose themselves to sway the world, and who certainly direct a great deal of its public talk, and carry a large silent background of its population with them. He was very well thought of among this class, went out a great deal into society, knew a great many people whom it is supposed something to know—and yet he was nobody. The merest clown could have confused him at any time by asking, 'Which is your county, Douglas?' Poor Cosmo had no county. He took the deficiency admirably, it is needless to say, and never shirked the truth when there was any need to tell it. In the majority of cases it was not at all necessary to tell it; but yet his friends knew well enough that he had no relations to give him shooting, or ask him during the hunting season; no district had any claim upon him, nor he upon it. A man may love his home when it has never been anywhere but in Hampstead. But it makes a great difference—even when his friends make up the deficiencies of family to him, and invite him, as he had this year been invited, to share the delights of a Scotch moor—still it makes a great difference. And when it is a matter of matrimony, and of producing his proofs of gentility, and of being a fit person to marry Anne Mountford, then the difference shows most of all.

When Cosmo attained that perfect freedom from all ties, and power of roaming wherever he pleased, without any clog to draw him back, which was in-

volved in his father's death (though it may be said for him that this was an event which he deeply regretted) he made up his mind that he would not marry, at least until he had reached sufficient distinction in his profession to make him somebody, quite independent of connections. But then he had not seen Anne Mountford. With her, without any secondary motives, he had fallen honestly and heartily in love, a love which he would, however, have managed to quench and get the better of, had it not turned out upon inquiry that Anne was one whom it was entirely permissible to love, and who could help him, not hold him back in the career of success. He had, however, many discussions with himself before he permitted himself to indulge his inclinations. He had felt that with people like the Mountfords the fact that he was nobody would tell with double power; and, indeed, if he had ever been tempted to invent a family of Douglasses of Somewhere-or-other, it was now. He had almost been led into doing this. He had even half-prepared a little romance, which no doubt Mr. Mountford, he thought, would have swallowed, of a ruined house dwindled away to its last representative, which had lost lands and even name in one of the rebellions. He had not chosen which rebellion, but he had made up the story otherwise with great enjoyment and a fine sense of its fitness: when that modern quality which for want of a better name we call a sense of humour stopped him. For a man of his time, a man of his enlightened opinions, a member of a liberal profession, a high-bred (if not high-born) Englishman to seek importance from a silly little school-girl romance was too absurd. He could not do it. He laughed aloud at himself with a little flush of shame on his countenance, and tossed away the fiction. But what a thing it would have been for Cosmo if the tumbledown old house which he

had invented and the bit of school-girl fiction had been true! They became almost such to him, so strongly did he feel that they would exactly fit his case. 'They would have been as stupid probably as—Mr. Mountford,' Cosmo said to himself, 'and pig-headed into the bargain, or they never would have thrown away everything for a gingerbread adventurer like Prince Charley—rude Lowland rustics talking broad Scotch, not even endowed with the mystery of Gaelic. But to be sure I might have made them Celts, and the Lord of Mount would not have been a whit the wiser. I think I can see a snuffy old laird in a blue bonnet, and a lumbering young lout scratching his red head. And these be your gods, oh Israel! I don't think I should have been much the better of such ancestors.' But nevertheless he felt in his heart that he would have been much the better for them. Other men might despise them, but Cosmo would have liked to believe in those Douglasses who had never existed. However, though he had invented them, he could not make use of them. It would have been too absurd. He laughed and reddened a little, and let them drop; and with a perfectly open and composed countenance informed Mr. Mountford that he was nobody and sprang from no known Douglasses at all. It was a kind of heroism in its way, the heroism of good sense, the influence of that wholesome horror of the ridiculous which is one of the strongest agencies of modern life.

After the interview with Mr. Mountford, and after the still greater shock of Anne's intimation that her father would not yield, Cosmo's mind had been much exercised, and there had been a moment in which he had not known what to do or say. Marriage without pecuniary advantage was impossible to him—he could not, he dared not think of it. It meant downfall of every kind, and a narrowing of all the

possibilities of life. It would be ruin to him and also to the girl who should be his wife. It would be impossible for him to keep her in the position she belonged to, and he would have to relinquish the position which belonged to him—two things not for a moment to be thought of. The only thing possible, evidently, was to wait. He was in love, but he was not anxious to marry at once. In any case it would be expedient to defer that event; and the old man might die—nay, most likely would die—and would not certainly change his will if all things were kept quiet and no demonstration made. He left Mount full of suppressed excitement, yet glad to be able to withdraw; to go away without compromising Anne, without being called upon to confront or defy the harsh parent, or do anything to commit himself. If Anne but held her tongue, there was no reason why Mr. Mountford might not suppose that she had given Cosmo up, and Cosmo was rather pleased than otherwise with the idea that she might do so. He wanted no sentimental passion; no sacrifice of everything for his sake. All for love and the world well lost, was not in the least a sentiment which commended itself to him. He would have much preferred that she had dissembled altogether, and put on an appearance of obeying her father; but this was a thing that he could not recommend her to do, any more than he could put forth his invented story of the ruined Douglasses. The fashion of his age and his kind and his education was so against lying, that it could be practised only individually, so to speak, and as it were accidentally. You might be betrayed into it by the emergency of a moment, but you could not, unless you were very sure indeed of your ground and your coadjutor, venture to suggest falsehood. The thing could not be done. This, however, was what he would have thought the safest thing—that all should fall back into its usual

state; that Anne should go on as if she were still simply Anne, without any difference in her life: and that, except for the fine but concealed bond between them, which should be avowed on the first possible occasion, but never made any display of while things were not ripe, everything should be exactly as before. This was perfectly fair in love, according to all known examples and rules. Something like it had happened in the majority of similar cases, and indeed, Cosmo said to himself with a half smile, a lover might feel himself little flattered for whom such a sacrifice would not be made. But all the same he could not suggest it. He could not say to Anne, 'Tell a lie for me---persuade your father that all is over between us, though it is not all over between us and never shall be till death parts us.' A young man of the nineteenth century, brought up at a public school and university, a member of the bar, and in very good society, could not say that. It would have been an anachronism. He might wish it, and did do so fervently; but to put it in words was impossible.

It was with this view, however, that Cosmo had omitted all mention of correspondence in his last interviews with Anne. They were full of so much that was novel and exciting to her that she did not notice the omission, nor in the hurry and rush of new sensations in her mind had she that eager longing for a letter which most girls would have felt on parting with their lovers. She had no habit of letters. She had never been at school or made any friendships of the kind that need to be solaced by continual outpourings upon paper. Almost all her intimates were about her, seeing her often, not standing in need of correspondence. She had not even said in the hurry of parting, 'You will write.' Perhaps she saw it like himself, but like himself was unwilling to propose the absolute concealment which

was desirable. Cosmo's mind had been full of nothing else on his way to Scotland to his friend's moor. He had thought of her half the time, and the other half of the time he had thought how to manage, how to secure her without injuring her (which was how he put it); the long night's journey was made short to him by these thoughts. He did not sleep, and he did not want to sleep; the darkness of the world through which he was rushing, the jumble of perpetual sound, which made a sort of atmosphere about him, was as a hermitage to Cosmo, as it has been to many before him. Railway trains, indeed, are hermitages in life for the much-pondering and careworn sons of the present age. There they can shut themselves up and think at will. He turned it all over and over in his mind. No wild notion—such as had moved the inexperienced mind of Anne with a thrill of delightful impulse—of rushing back to work and instantly beginning the toil which was to win her, occurred to Anne's lover. To be sure it was the Long Vacation, which is a thing girls do not take into account, and Cosmo would have smiled at the notion of giving up his shooting and going back to his chambers out of the mere sentiment of losing no time, which probably would have appeared to Anne a heroic and delightful idea; but he did what Anne could not have done; he went into the whole question, all the *pros* and *cons*, and weighed them carefully. He had a long journey, far up into the wilds, by the Highland railway. Morning brought him into the land of hills and rivers, and noon to the bleaker mountains and glens, wealthy only in grouse and deer. He did nothing but think it over in the night and through the day. Nevertheless, Cosmo, when he reached Glentuan, was as little worn out as it becomes an experienced young Englishman to be after a long journey. He was quite fresh for dinner

after he had performed the customary rites—ready to take his part in all the conversation and help in the general amusement.

‘Douglas—which of the Douglasses does he belong to?’ one of the guests asked after he had withdrawn.

‘I’ve always known him as Douglas of Trinity,’ said the host.

‘Trinity, Trinity,’ answered the other, who was a local personage, thinking of nothing but territorial designation, ‘I never heard of any Douglasses of Trinity. Do you mean the place near Edinburgh where all the seaside villas are?’

‘He means Cambridge,’ said another, laughing.

‘Douglas is the best fellow in the world, but he is—nobody: at least so I’ve always heard.’

Cosmo did not overhear this conversation, but he knew that it had taken place as well as if he had heard it; not that it did him the least harm with his comrades of the moment, to whom he was a very nice fellow, a capital companion, thoroughly acquainted with all the habits and customs of their kind, and though no great shot, yet good enough for all that was necessary, good enough to enjoy the sport, which nobody who is awkward and really ignorant can do. But he knew that one time or other this little conversation would take place, and though he felt that he might do himself the credit to say that he had no false shame, nor attached any exaggerated importance to the subject, still it was no doubt of more importance to him than it was to those with whom it was only one out of many subjects of a casual conversation. All the same, however, even these casual talkers did not forget it. Strange superstition, strangest folly, he might well say to himself with such a smile as was possible in the circumstances. Douglas of Trinity—Douglas of

Lincoln's Inn meant something—but to be one of the Douglasses of some dilapidated old house, what did that mean? This question, however, had nothing to do with the matter, and the smile had not much pleasantness in it, as may easily be perceived.

The fruit of Cosmo's cogitations, however, was that he wrote to Anne, as has been seen, and sent his letter to Charley Ashley to be delivered. This was partly policy and partly uncertainty, a sort of half measure to feel his way; but, on the whole, was most of all the necessity he felt to say something to her, to seize upon her, not to let this beautiful dream escape from him.

'We said nothing about writing, and I don't know, my dearest, what you wish in this respect. Silence seems impossible, but if you wish it, if you ask this sacrifice, I will be content with my perfect trust in my Anne, and do whatever she would have me do. I know that it would be against your pride and your delicacy, my darling, to keep up any correspondence which the severest parent could call clandestine, and if I take advantage of a good fellow who is devoted to us both, for once, it is not with the least idea that you will like it, or will allow me to continue it. But what can I do? I must know what is your will in this matter, and I must allow myself the luxury once, if only once, of telling you on paper what I have tried to tell you so often in words—how I love you, my love, and what it is to me to love you—a new creation, an opening up both of earth and heaven.' (We need not continue what Cosmo said on this point because, to be sure, it has all been said over and over again, sometimes no doubt worse, and sometimes unquestionably a great deal better, than he said it: and there is no advantage that we know of to be got from making young persons prematurely acquainted with every possible manner in which this

sentiment can be expressed.) At the end he resumed, with generous sentiment, which was perfectly genuine, and yet not any more free of calculation and the idea of personal advantage than all the rest was:—

‘Charley Ashley is the truest friend that ever man had; he has loved you all his life (*that* is nothing wonderful), and yet, though, at such a cost as I do not like to try to estimate, he still loves me, though he knows that I have come between him and any possibility there was that he should ever win any return from you. To do him full justice, I do not think he ever looked for any return, but was content to love you as in itself a happiness and an elevation for which a man might well be grateful; but still it is hard upon him to see a man no better than himself, nay, less worthy in a hundred ways, winning the unimaginable reward for which he, poor Charley, had not so much as ventured to hope. Yet with a generosity—how can I express it, how could I ever have emulated it?—which is beyond words, he has neither withdrawn his brotherly kindness from me, nor refused to stand by me in my struggle towards you and happiness. What can we say to a friend like this? Trust him, my dearest, as I do. I do not mean that he should be the medium of communication between us, but there are ways in which he may be of help and comfort to us both; and, in the meantime, you will at your dear pleasure tell me yourself what you wish to do, or let me know by him: if I may write, if I must be silent, if you will make me a happy man now and then by a word from your hand, or if I am to wait for that hand till I dare claim it as mine. Nay, but my Anne, my darling, for once, if for once only, you must send two or three words, a line or two, to give me patience and hope.’

As he folded this up his whole heart longed for

the 'word or two' he had asked for. Without that it almost seemed to him that all that had passed before might mean nothing, might roll away like the mists, like the fabric of a vision. But at the same time Cosmo felt in his heart that if Anne would send him the consolation of this one letter through Charley Ashley, and after that bid him be silent and wait for chance opportunities or modes of communication, that she would do well. It was what he would have advised her to do had he been free to tell her exactly what he thought. But he was not free to advise such a proceeding. It was not in his *rôle*; nor could he have proposed any clandestine correspondence, though he would have liked it. It was impossible. Anne would most probably have thrown him off as altogether unworthy had he proposed anything of the kind to her, or at least would have regarded him with very different eyes from those with which she looked upon him now. And even independent of this he could not have done it: the words would have failed him to make such a proposal. It was contrary to all tradition, and to the spirit of his class and time.

When he had despatched this letter Cosmo's bosom's lord sat more lightly upon his throne. He went out next morning very early and made a respectable, a very respectable, bag. Nobody could say that he was a cockney sportsman not knowing how to aim or hold a gun. In this as in everything else he had succeeded in mastering the rules of every fashion, and lived as a man who was to the manner born. He was indeed to the manner born, with nothing in him, so far as he was aware, that went against the traditions of a gentleman: and yet similar conversations to that one which occurred in the smoking-room, occurred occasionally on the hills among the heather. 'Of what Douglasses is your friend?' 'Oh, I don't know that he is of any Douglasses,' the master of the moor

would say with impatience. ‘He is a capital fellow, and a rising man in the law—that’s all I know about him;’ or else, ‘He is a college friend, a man who took a very good degree, as clever a fellow as you will meet with, and getting on like a house on fire.’ But all these recommendations, as they all knew, were quite beside the question. He was of nowhere in particular—he was nobody. It was a mysterious dispensation, altogether unexplainable, that such a man should have come into the world without suitable ancestors who could have responded for him. But he had done so. And he could not even produce that fabulous house which, as he had invented it, was a far prettier and more truly gentle and creditable family than half the families who would have satisfied every question. Thus the very best quality of his age was against him as well as its superstitions. Had he been an enriched grocer to whom it could have done no possible good, he might easily have invented a pedigree; but being himself he could not do it. And thus the injury he had sustained at the hands of Providence was beyond all remedy or hope of amendment.

CHAPTER X.

FAMILY COUNSELS.

‘HAS Anne spoken to you at all on the subject—what does she intend to do?’

Mr. Mountford was subjecting his wife to a cross-examination as to the affairs of the household. It was a practice he had. He felt it to be beneath his dignity to inquire into these details in his own person, but he found them out through her. He was not a man who allowed his authority to be shared.

So far as ordering the dinner went and regulating the household bills, he was content to allow that she had a mission in the world; but everything of greater importance passed through his hands. Mrs. Mountford was in the habit of expressing her extreme satisfaction with this rule, especially in respect to Anne. 'What could I have done with a stubborn girl like that? she would have worn me out. The relief that it is to feel that she is in her father's hands and not in mine!' she was in the habit of saying. But, though she was free of the responsibility, she was not without trouble in the matter. She had to submit to periodical questioning, and, if she had been a woman of fine susceptibilities, would have felt herself something like a spy upon Anne. But her susceptibilities were not fine, and the discussion of other people which her husband's inquiries made necessary was not disagreeable to her. Few people find it altogether disagreeable to sit in a secret tribunal upon the merits and demerits of those around them. Sometimes Mrs. Mountford would rebel at the closeness of the examination to which she was subjected, but on the whole she did not dislike it. She was sitting with her husband in that business-room of his which could scarcely be dignified by the name of a library. She had her usual worsted work in her hand, and a wisp of skeins plaited together in various bright colours on a table before her. Sometimes she would pause to count one, two, three, of the stitches on her canvas; her head was bent over it, which often made it more easy to say what she had got to say. A serious truth may be admitted, or censure conveyed, in the soft sentence which falls from a woman's lips with an air of having nothing particular in it, when the one, two, three, of the Berlin pattern, the exact shade of the wool, is evidently the primary subject in her mind. Mrs. Mountford felt and employed to the

utmost the shield of her work. It made everything more easy, and took away all tedium from these prolonged conversations. As for Mr. Mountford, there was always a gleam of expectation in his reddish hazel eyes. Whether it was about a servant, or his children, or even an indifferent person in the parish, he seemed to be always on the verge of finding something out. 'What does she intend to do?' he repeated. 'She has never mentioned the subject again, but I suppose she has talked it over with you.'

'Something has been said,' answered his wife; 'to say that she had talked it over with me would not be true, St. John. Anne is not one to talk over anything with anybody, especially me. But something was said. I confess I thought it my duty, standing in the place of a mother to her, to open the subject.'

'And what is she going to do?'

'You must know very little about girls, St. John, though you have two of your own (and one of them as difficult to deal with as I ever encountered), if you think that all that is wanted in order to know what they are going to do is to talk it over with them—it is not so easy as that.'

'I suppose you heard something about it, however,' he said, with a little impatience. 'Does she mean to give the fellow up? that is the chief thing I want to know.'

'I never knew a girl yet that gave a fellow up, as you call it, because her father told her,' said Mrs. Mountford: and then she paused, hesitating between two shades; 'that blue is too blue, it will never go with the others. I must drive into Hunston to-day or to-morrow, and see if I cannot get a better match.—As for giving up, that was not spoken of, St. John. Nobody ever believes in it coming to that. They think you will be angry; but that of

course, if they stand out, you will come round at the last.'

'Does Anne think that? She must know very little of me if she thinks that I will come round at the last.'

'They all think it,' said Mrs. Mountford, calmly counting the lines of the canvas with her needle: 'I am not speaking only of Anne. I daresay she counts upon it less than most do, for it must be allowed that she is very like you, St. John, and as obstinate as a mule. You have to be very decided indeed before a girl will think you mean it. Why, there is Rose. What I say is not blaming Anne, for I am a great deal more sure what my own child would think than what Anne would think. Rose would no more believe that you would cross her seriously in anything she wanted than she would believe you could fly if you tried. She would cry outwardly, I don't doubt, but she would smile in her heart. She would say to herself, "Papa go against me! impossible!" and the little puss would look very pitiful and submissive, and steal her arms round your neck and coax you, and impose upon you. You would be more than mortal, St. John, if you did not come round at the end.'

Mr. Mountford's countenance relaxed while this description was made—an almost imperceptible softening crept about the corners of his mouth. He seemed to feel the arms of the little puss creeping round his neck, and her pretty little rosebud face close to his own. But he shook off the fascination abruptly, and frowned to make his wife think him insensible to it. 'I hope I am not such a weak fool,' he said. 'And there is not much chance that Anne would try that way,' he added, with some bitterness. Rose was supposed to be his favourite child, but yet he resented the fact that no such confession of his absolute authority and homage to his power was to be looked for from Anne.

Mrs. Mountford had no deliberate intention of presenting his eldest daughter to him under an unfavourable light, but if she wished him to perceive the superior dutifulness and sweetness of her own child, could anyone wonder? Rose had been hardly used by Nature. She ought to have been a boy and the heir of entail, or, if not so, she ought to have had a brother to take that position, and protect her interests; and neither of these things had happened. That her father should love her best and do all in his will that it was possible to do for her, was clearly Rose's right as compensation for the other injustices of fate.

'No,' said Mrs. Mountford, after a longer piece of mental arithmetic than usual, 'that is not Anne's way; but still you must do Anne justice, St. John. She will never believe, any more than Rose, that you will go against her. I don't say this from anything she has said to me. Indeed, I cannot say that she has spoken to me at all on the subject. It was I that introduced it; I thought it my duty.'

'And she gave you to understand that she would go on with it, whatever I might say; and that, like an old fool, if she stuck to it, I would give in at the end?'

'St. John! St. John! how you do run away with an idea! I never said that, nor anything like it. I told you what, judging from what I know of girls, I felt sure Anne must feel. They never dream of any serious opposition: as we have given in to them from their childhood, they think we will continue to give in to them to the end; and I am sure it is quite reasonable to think so; only recollect how often we have yielded, and done whatever they pleased.'

'This time she will find that I will not yield,' said Mr. Mountford, getting up angrily, and planting himself in front of the polished fireplace, which was innocent of any warmth. He set himself very firmly

upon his feet, which were wide apart, and put his hands under his coat tails in the proverbial attitude of an Englishman. To see him standing there you would have thought him a man who never would yield; and yet he had, as his wife said, yielded to a great many vagaries of the girls. She gave various curious little glances of investigation at him from over her wools.

‘I should like to know,’ she said, ‘why you object so much to Mr. Douglas? he seems a very gentlemanly young man. Do you know something more of him than we know?’

‘Nobody,’ said Mr. Mountford, with solemnity, ‘knows any more of the young man than we know.’

‘Then why should you be so determined against him?’ persisted his wife.

Mr. Mountford fixed his eyes severely upon her. ‘Letitia,’ he said, ‘there is one thing, above all others, that I object to in a man; it is when nobody knows anything about him. You will not deny that I have had some experience in life; some experience you must grant me, whatever my deficiencies may be; and the result of all I have observed is that a man whom nobody knows is not a person to connect yourself with. If he is a member of a well-known family—like our own, for instance—there are his people to answer for him. If, on the other hand, he has made himself of consequence in the world, that may answer the same purpose. But when a man is nobody, you have nothing to trust to; he may be a very good sort of person; there may be no harm in him; but the chances are against him. At all times the chances are heavily against a man whom nobody knows.’

Mr. Mountford was not disinclined to lay down the law, but he seldom did it on an abstract question; and his wife looked at him, murmuring ‘one, two, three’ with her lips, while her eyes expressed a

certain mild surprise. The feeling, however, was scarcely so strong as surprise; it was rather with a sensation of unexpectedness that she listened. Surely nobody had a better right to his opinion: but she did not look for a general dogma when she had asked a particular question. 'But,' she said, 'papa! he was known very well, I suppose, or they would not have had him there—to the Ashleys, at least.'

'What was known? Nothing about him—nothing whatever about him! as Anne was so absurd as to say they know *him*, or their own opinion of him; but they know nothing *about* him—nobody knows anything about him. Whatever you may think, Letitia, that is quite enough for me.'

'Oh, my dear, I don't pretend to understand; but we meet a great many people whom we don't know anything of. In society we are meeting them for ever.'

'Pardon me,' said Mr. Mountford, lifting an emphatic finger; '*we* may know nothing about them, but somebody knows. Now, all I hear of this man is that he is nobody; he may be good or he may be bad, much more likely the latter; but, this being the case, if he were an angel I will have nothing to do with him; neither shall anyone belonging to me. We are well-known people ourselves, and we must form connections with well-known people—or none at all.'

'None at all; you would not keep her an old maid, papa?'

'Pshaw!' said Mr. Mountford, turning away. Then he came back to add a last word. 'Understand me, Letitia,' he said; 'I think it's kind of you to do your best for Anne, for she is a girl who has given you a great deal of trouble; but it is of no use; if she is so determined to have her own way, she shall not have anything else. I am not the weak idiot of a father you think me; if I have given in to her

before, there was no such important matter in hand ; but I have made up my mind now : and it may be better for Rose and you, perhaps, if the worst comes to the worst.'

Mrs. Mountford was completely roused now ; the numbers, so to speak, dropped from her lips ; her work fell on her knee. 'It is quite true what you say,' she said, feeling herself on very doubtful ground, and not knowing what to do, whether to express gratitude or to make no reference to this strange and dark saying : 'she has given me a great deal of trouble : but she is your child, St. John, and that is enough for me.'

He did not make any reply ; nor did he repeat the mysterious promise of advantage to follow upon Anne's disobedience. He was not so frank with his wife as he had been with his daughter. He went to his writing-table once more, and sat down before it with that air of having come to an end of the subject under discussion which his wife knew so well. He did not mean to throw any further light to her upon the possible good that might result to Rose. To tell the truth, this possibility was to himself too vague to count for much. In the first place, he expected Anne to be frightened, and to give in ; and, in the second place, he fully intended to live long after both his daughters had married and settled, and to be able to make what dispositions he pleased for years to come. He was not an old man ; he was still under sixty, and as vigorous (he believed) as ever he had been. In such a case a will is a very pretty weapon to flourish in the air, but it does nobody much harm. Mr. Mountford thought a great deal of this threat of his ; but he no more meant it to have any speedy effect than he expected the world to come to an end. Perhaps most of the injustices that people do by will are done in the same way. It is not comprehensible to any man that he should be

swept away and others reign in his stead ; therefore he is more free to make use of that contingency than if he believed in it. There would always be plenty of time to set it right ; he had not the least intention of dying ; but for the moment it was something potent to conjure withal. He reseated himself at his table, with a consciousness that he had the power in his hands to turn his whole world topsy-turvy, and yet that it would not do anybody any harm. Naturally, this feeling was not shared either by Anne, to whom he had made the original threat, nor by his wife, to whom he held out the promise. We all know very well that other people must die—it is only in our own individual case that the event seems unlikely.

Mrs. Mountford's mind was filled with secret excitement ; she was eager to know what her husband meant, but she did not venture to ask for any explanation. She watched him over her work with a secret closeness of observation such as she had never felt herself capable of before. What did he mean ? what would he do ? She knew nothing about the law of inheritance, except that entail kept an estate from the daughters, which was a shame, she thought. But in respect to everything else her mind was confused, and she did not know what her husband could do to benefit Rose at Anne's expense. But the more she did not understand, the more eager she was to know. When you are possessed by an eager desire for the enrichment of another, it does not seem a bad or selfish object as it might do if the person to be benefited was yourself ; and, least of all, does it ever appear that to look out for the advantage of your child can be wrong. But the poor lady was in the uncomfortable position of not being able to inquire further. She could not show herself too anxious to know what was to happen after her husband's death ; and even to take 'the worst' for granted was not a pleasant thing, for Mrs Mount-

ford, though naturally anxious about Rose, was not a hard woman who would wilfully hurt anyone. She sat for some time in silence, her heart beating very fast, her ears very alert for any word that might fall from her husband's mouth. But no word came from his mouth. He sat and turned over the papers on the table; he was pleased to have excited her interest, her hopes and fears, but he did not half divine the extent to which he had excited her, not feeling for his own part that there was anything in it to warrant immediate expectation: while she, on the other hand, though she had a genuine affection for her husband, could not help saying to herself, 'He may go any day; there is never a day that some one does not die; and if he died while he was on these terms with Anne, what was it, what was it, that might perhaps happen to Rose?' Mrs. Mountford turned over in her mind every possible form of words she could think of in which to pursue her inquiries; but it was very difficult, nay, impossible, to do it: and, though she was not altogether without artifice, her powers altogether failed her in presence of this difficult question. At length she ventured to ask, clearing her throat with elaborate precaution,

'Do you mean to say that if Anne sets her heart upon her own way, and goes against you—all our children do it more or less: one gets accustomed to it. St. John—do you mean to say—that you will change your will, and put her out of the succession?—'

Mrs. Mountford faltered over the end of her sentence, not knowing what to say.

'There is no succession. What I have is my own to do what I like with it,' he said sharply; and then he opened a big book which lay on the table, and began to write. It was a well-known, if tacit, signal between them, that his need of social intercourse was over, and that his wife might go; but she did not move for some time. She went on with

her work, with every appearance of calm; but her mind was full of commotion. As her needle went through and through the canvas, she cast many a furtive glance at her husband turning over the pages of his big book, writing here and there a note. They had been as one for twenty years; two people who were, all the world said, most 'united'—a couple devoted to each other. But neither did she understand what her husband meant, nor could he have believed the kind of feeling with which, across her worsted work, she kept regarding him. She had no wish but that he should live and thrive. Her position, her personal interests, her importance were all bound up in him; nevertheless, she contemplated the contingency of his death with a composure that would have horrified him, and thought with much more keen and earnest feeling of what would follow than any alarm of love as to the possibility of the speedy ending of his life produced in her. Thus the two sat within a few feet of each other, life-long companions, knowing still so little of each other—the man playing with the fears and hopes of his dependents, while smiling in his sleeve at the notion of any real occasion for those fears and hopes; the woman much more intent upon the problematical good fortune of her child than on the existence of her own other half, her closest and nearest connection, with whom her life had been so long identified. Perhaps the revelation of this feeling in her would have been the most cruel disclosure had both states of mind been made apparent to the eye of day. There was not much that was unnatural in his thoughts, for many men like to tantalise their successors, and few men realise with any warmth of imagination their own complete withdrawal from the pains and pleasures of life; but to know that his wife could look his death in the face without flinching, and think more of his will than of the event

which must precede any effect it could have, would have penetrated through all his armour and opened his eyes in the most dolorous way. But he never suspected this; he thought, with true human fatuity, with a little gratified importance and vanity, of the commotion he had produced—that Anne would be ‘pulled up’ in her career by so serious a threat; that Rose would be kept ‘up to the mark’ by a flutter of hope as to the reward which might fall to her. All this it pleased him to think of. He was complacent as to the effect of his menaces and promises, but at bottom he felt them to be of no great consequence to himself—amusing rather than otherwise; for he did not in the least intend to die.

At last Mrs. Mountford felt that she could stay no longer. She rose up from her chair, and gathered her wools in one arm. ‘The girls will be coming in from their ride,’ she said. ‘I must really go.’

The girls had all the machinery of life at Mount in their hands; in other houses it is ‘the boys’ that are put forward as influencing everything. The engagements and occupations of the young people map out the day, and give it diversity, though the elder ones move the springs of all that is most important. It was generally when ‘the girls’ were busy in some special matter of their own that Mrs. Mountford came to ‘sit with’ her husband in the library, and furnished him with so much information. But their positions had been changed to-day. It was he who had been her informant, telling her about things more essential to be known than any of her gossip about Anne’s intentions or Rose’s habits. She lingered even as she walked across the floor, and dropped her little plaited sheaf of many colours and stooped to pick it up, inviting further confidence. But her husband did not respond. He let her go without taking any notice of her proceedings or asking any question as to her unusual

reluctance to leave him. At last, when she had fairly turned her back upon him, and had her hand upon the handle of the door, his voice startled her, and made her turn round with anxious expectation.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘I forgot to tell you: I have a letter to-day from Heathcote Mountford, offering a visit. I suppose he wants to spy out the nakedness of the land.’

‘Heathcote Mountford!’ cried his wife, bewildered; then added, after a little interval, ‘I am sure he is quite welcome to come when he pleases—he or anyone. There is no nakedness in the land that we need fear.’

‘He is coming next week,’ said Mr. Mountford. ‘Of course, as you perceive, I could not refuse.’

Mrs. Mountford paused at the door, with a great deal of visible interest and excitement. It was no small relief to her to find a legitimate reason for it. ‘Of course you could not refuse: why should you refuse? I shall be very glad to see him; and’——she added, after a momentary pause, which gave the words significance, ‘so will the girls.’

‘I wish I could think so; the man is forty,’ Mr. Mountford said. Then he gave a little wave of his hand, dismissing his wife. Even the idea of a visit from his heir did not excite him. He was not even conscious, for the moment, of the hostile feeling with which men are supposed to regard their heirs in general, and which, if legitimate in any case, is certainly so in respect to an heir of entail. It is true that he had looked upon Heathcote Mountford with a mild hatred all his life as his natural enemy; but at the present crisis the head of the house regarded his successor with a kind of derisive complacency, as feeling that he himself was triumphantly ‘keeping the fellow out of it.’ He had never been so certain of living long, of cheating all who looked for his death, as he was after he had made use of

that instrument of terrorism against his daughter. Heathcote Mountford had not been at Mount for nearly twenty years. It pleased his kinsman that he should offer to come now, just to be tantalised, to have it proved to him that his inheritance of the family honours was a long way off, and very problematical in any sense. 'A poor sort of fellow; always ailing, always delicate; my life is worth two of his,' he was saying, with extreme satisfaction, in his heart.

CHAPTER XI.

PROJECTS OF MARRIAGE.

THE girls had just come in from their ride; they were in the hall awaiting that cup of tea which is the universal restorative, when Mrs. Mountford with her little sheaf of wools went to join them. They heard her come softly along the passage which traversed the house, from the library, in quite the other end of it, to the hall,—a slight shuffle in one foot making her step recognisable. Rose was very clear-sighted in small matters, and it was she who had remarked that, after having taken her work to the library 'to sit with papa,' her mother had generally a much greater acquaintance with all that was about to happen on the estate or in the family affairs. She held up her finger to Anne as the step was heard approaching. 'Now we shall hear the last particulars,' Rose said; 'what is going to be done with us all, and if we are to go to Brighton, and all that is to happen.' Anne was much less curious on these points. Whether the family went to Brighton or not mattered little to her. She took off her hat, and smoothed back her hair from her forehead. It was October by this time, and no

longer warm; but the sun was shining, and the afternoon more like summer than autumn. Old Saymore had brought in the tray with the tea. There was something on his very lips to say, but he did not desire the presence of his mistress, which checked his confidences with the young ladies. Anne, though supposed generally to be proud, was known by the servants to be very gentle of access, and ready to listen to anything that concerned them. And as for Rose, old Saymore—who had, so to speak, seen her born—did not feel himself restrained by the presence of Rose. ‘I had something to ask Miss Anne,’ he said, in a kind of undertone, as if making a remark to himself.

‘What is it, Saymore?’

‘No, no,’ said the old man, shaking his head. ‘No, no; I am not such a fool as I look. There is no time now for my business. No, no, Miss Anne, no, no,’ he went on, shaking his head as he arranged the cups and saucers. The sun, though it had passed off that side of the house, had caught in some glittering thing outside, and sent in a long ray of reflection into the huge old dark mirror which filled up one side of the room. Old Saymore, with his white locks, was reflected in this from top to toe, and the shaking of the white head produced a singular commotion in it like circles in water. He was always very deliberate in his movements; and as Mrs. Mountford’s step stayed in the passage, and a sound of voices betrayed that she had been stopped by some one on the way, Rose, with ideas of ‘fun’ in her mind, invited the arrested confidence. ‘Make haste and speak,’ she said, ‘Saymore: mamma has stopped to talk to Worth. There is no telling how long it may be before she comes here.’

‘If it’s Mrs. Worth, it may be with the same object, miss,’ said Saymore, with solemnity. And then he made a measured, yet sidelong step to-

wards Anne. 'I hope, Miss Anne, you'll not disapprove?'

'What do you want me to approve of, Saymore? I don't think it matters very much so long as mamma is pleased.'

'It matters to me, Miss Anne; it would seem unnatural to do a thing that was really an important thing without the sanction of the family; and I come from my late lady's side, Miss Anne. I've always held by you, miss, if I may make so bold as to say it.'

Saymore made so bold as to say this often, and it was perfectly understood in the house; indeed it was frequently supposed by new-comers into the servants' hall that old Saymore was a humble relation of the family on that side.

'It is very kind of you to be so faithful; tell me quickly what it is, if you want to say it to me privately, and not to mamma.'

'Miss Anne, I am an old man,' he said; 'you'll perhaps think it unbecoming. I'm a widower, miss, and I've no children nor nobody belonging to me.'

'We've known all that,' cried Rose, breaking in, 'as long as we've lived.'

Saymore took no notice of the interruption; he did not even look at her, but proceeded with gravity, though with a smile creeping to the corners of his mouth. 'And some folks do say, Miss Anne, that, though I'm old, I'm a young man of my years. There is a deal of difference in people. Some folks is older, some younger. Yourself, Miss Anne, if I might make so bold as to say so, you're not a *young* lady for your years.'

'No, is she?' said Rose. 'I always tell you so, Anne! you've no imagination, and no feelings; you are as serious as the big trees. Quick, quick, Saymore, mamma is coming!'

'I've always been considered young-looking,' said

old Saymore, with a complacent smile, 'and many and many a one has advised me to better my condition. That might be two words for themselves and one for me, Miss Anne,' he continued, the smile broadening into a smirk of consciousness. 'Ladies is very pushing now-a-days; but I think I've picked out one as will never deceive me, and, if the family don't have any objections, I think I am going to get married, always hoping, Miss Anne, as you don't disapprove.'

'To get married?' said Anne, sitting upright with sheer amazement. Anne's thoughts had not been occupied on this subject as the thoughts of girls often are; but it had entered her imagination suddenly, and Anne's imagination was of a superlative kind, which shed a glory over everything that occupied it. This strange, beautiful, terrible, conjunction of two had come to look to her the most wonderful, mysterious, solemn thing in the world since it came within her own possibilities. All the comedy in it which is so apt to come uppermost had disappeared when she felt herself walking with Cosmo towards the verge of that unknown and awful paradise. Life had not turned into a tragedy indeed, but into a noble, serious poem, full of awe, full of wonder, entering in by those great mysterious portals, which were guarded as by angels of love and fate. She sat upright in her chair, and gazed with wide open eyes and lips apart at this caricature of her fancy. Old Saymore? the peal of laughter with which Rose received the announcement was the natural sentiment; but Anne had not only a deep sense of horror at this desecration of an idea so sacred, but was also moved by the secondary consciousness that old Saymore too had feelings which might be wounded, which added to her gravity. Saymore, for his part, took Rose's laugh lightly enough, but looked at her own grave countenance

with rising offence. 'You seem to think that I haven't no right to please myself, Miss Anne,' he said.

'But who is the lady? tell us who is the lady,' cried Rose.

Saymore paused and held up a finger. The voices in the corridor ceased. Some one was heard to walk away in the opposite direction, and Mrs. Mountford's soft shuffle advanced to the hall. 'Another time, Miss Anne, another time,' he said, in a half whisper, shaking his finger in sign of secrecy. Then he walked towards the door, and held it open for his mistress with much solemnity. Mrs. Mountford came in more quickly than usual; she was half angry, half laughing. 'Saymore, I think you are an old fool,' she said.

Saymore made a bow which would have done credit to a courtier. 'There's a many, madam,' he replied, 'as has been fools like me.' He did not condescend to justify himself to Mrs. Mountford, but went out without further explanation. He belonged to the other side of the house; not that he was not perfectly civil to his master's second wife—but she was always 'the new mistress' to Saymore, though she had reigned at Mount for nearly twenty years.

'What does he mean, mamma?' cried Rose, with eager curiosity. She was fond of gossip, about county people if possible, but, if not, about village people, or the servants in the house, it did not matter. Her eyes shone with amazement and excitement. 'Is it old Worth? who is it? What fun to have a wedding in the house!'

'He is an old fool,' said Mrs. Mountford, putting the wools out of her arm and placing herself in the most comfortable chair. 'Give me a cup of tea, Rose. I have been standing in the corridor till I'm quite tired, and before that with papa.'

‘You were not standing when you were with papa?’

‘Well, yes, part of the time; he has a way—Anne has it too, it is very tiresome—of keeping the most important thing he has to say till the last moment. Just when you have got up and got to the door, and think you are free, then he tells you. It is very tiresome—Anne is just the same—in many things she is exceedingly like papa.’

‘Then he told you something important?’ cried Rose, easily diverted from the first subject. ‘Are we to go to Brighton? What is going to happen? I told Anne you would have something to tell us when we heard you had been sitting with papa.’

‘Of course we consult over things when we get a quiet hour together,’ Mrs. Mountford said; and then she made a pause. Even Anne felt her heart beat. It seemed natural that her own affairs should have been the subject of this conference; for what was there in the family that was half so interesting as Anne’s affairs? A little colour came to her face, then fled again, leaving her more pale than usual.

‘If it was about me, I would rather not have my affairs talked over,’ she said.

‘My dear Anne,’ said Mrs. Mountford, ‘try not to get into the way of thinking that everything that is interesting in the family must come from you; this is a sort of way that girls get when they begin to think of love and such nonsense; but I should have expected more sense from you.’

Love and such nonsense! Anne’s countenance became crimson. Was this the way to characterise that serious, almost solemn, mystery which had taken possession of her life? And then the girl, in spite of herself, laughed. She felt herself suddenly placed beside old Saymore in his grotesque sentiment, and between scorn and disgust and unwilling

amusement words failed her; then the others laughed, which made Anne more angry still.

‘I am glad to hear you laugh,’ said Mrs. Mountford, ‘for that shows you are not so much on your high horse as I fancied you were. And yours is such a very high horse, my dear! No, I don’t mean to say you were not referred to, for you would not believe me; there was some talk about you; but papa said he had spoken to you himself, and I never make nor meddle between him and you, as you know, Anne. It was something quite different. We are not going to Brighton, Rosie; some one is coming here.’

‘Oh—h!’ Rose’s countenance fell. Brighton, which was a break upon the monotony of the country, was always welcome to her. ‘And even Willie Ashley gone away!’ was the apparently irrelevant observation she made, with a sudden drooping of the corners of her mouth.

‘What is Willie Ashley to you? you can’t have your game in winter,’ said her mother, with unconscious cynicism; ‘but there is somebody coming who is really interesting. I don’t know that you have ever seen him; I have seen him only once in my life. I thought him the most interesting-looking man I ever saw; he was like a hero on the stage, tall and dark, with a natural curl in his hair; and such eyes!’

Rose’s blue and inexperienced orbs grew round and large with excitement. ‘Who is it? No one we ever saw; oh, no, indeed, I never saw a man a bit like that. Who is it, mamma?’

Mrs. Mountford liked to prolong the excitement. It pleased her to have so interesting a piece of news in hand. Besides, Anne remained perfectly unmoved, and to excite Rose was too easy. ‘He is a man with a story too,’ she said. ‘When he was quite young he was in love with a lady, a very grand

personage, indeed, quite out of the reach of a poor gentleman like—this gentleman. She was an Italian, and I believe she was a princess or something. That does not mean the same as it does here, you know ; but she was a great deal grander than he was, and her friends would not let her marry him.’

‘And what happened?’ cried Rose breathless, as her mother came to an artful pause. Anne did not say anything, but she leant forward, and her eyes too had lighted up with interest. It was no part of Mrs. Mountford’s plan to interest Anne, but, once entered upon her story, the desire of the artist for appreciation seized upon her.

‘What could happen, my dear?’ she said, pointedly adding a moral; ‘they gave everybody a great deal of trouble for a time, as young people who are crossed in anything always do; but people abroad make very short work with these matters. The lady was married, of course, to somebody in her own rank of life.’

‘And the gentleman?—it was the gentleman you were telling us about.’

‘The gentleman—poor Heathcote! well, he has got on well enough—I suppose as well as other people. He has never married; but then I don’t see how he could marry, for he has nothing to marry upon.’

‘Heathcote! do you mean Heathcote Mountford?’

It was Anne who spoke this time—the story had grown more and more interesting to her as it went on. Her voice trembled a little as she asked this hasty question; it quivered with sympathy, with wondering pain. The lady married somebody—in her own rank in life—the man never married at all, but probably could not because he had nothing to marry on. Was that the end of it all—a dull matter-

of-fact little tragedy? She remembered hearing such words before often enough, but never had given them any attention until now.

‘Yes, I mean your cousin Heathcote Mountford. He is coming next week to see papa.’

Rose had been looking from one to another with her round eyes full of excitement. Now she drew a long breath and said in a tone of awe, ‘The heir of the entail.’

‘Yes, the heir of the entail,’ said Mrs. Mountford solemnly. She looked at her daughter, and the one pair of eyes seemed to take fire from the other. ‘He is as poor—as poor as a mouse. Of course he will have Mount when—anything happens to papa. But papa’s life is as good as his. He is thirty-five, and he has never had much stamina. I don’t mean to say that it is so generally, but sometimes a man is quite old at thirty-five.’

At this time very different reflections gleamed across the minds of the girls. ‘Papa was nearly forty when manuma married him,’ Rose said to herself with great quickness, while the thought that passed through Anne’s mind was ‘Thirty-five—five years older than Cosmo.’ Neither one thing nor the other, it may be said, had much to do with Heathcote Mountford; and yet there was meaning in it, so far as Rose at least was concerned.

She was thoughtful for the rest of the day, and asked her mother several very pertinent questions when they were alone, as ‘Where does Heathcote Mountford live? Has he any money at all? or does he do anything for his living? has he any brothers and sisters?’ She was determined to have a very clear understanding of all the circumstances of his life.

‘Oh yes, my love, he has a little,’ Mrs. Mountford said; ‘one says a man has nothing when he has

not enough to settle upon; but most people have a little. I suppose he lives in London in chambers, like most unmarried men. No, he has no brothers and sisters,—but, yes, I forgot there is one—a young one—whom he is very much attached to, people say.’

‘And he will have Mount when papa dies,’ said Rose. ‘How strange that, though papa has two children, it should go away to quite a different person, not even a very near relation! It is very unjust; don’t you think it is very unjust? I am sure it is not a thing that ought to be.’

‘It is the entail, my dear. You must remember the entail.’

‘But what is the good of an entail? If we had had a brother, it might have been a good thing to keep it in the family; but surely, when we have no brother, we are the proper heirs. It would be more right even, if one person were to have it all, that Anne should be the person. *She*,’ said Rose, with a little fervour, ‘would be sure to take care of me.’

‘I think so too, Rosie,’ said her mother: ‘but then Anne will not always just be Anne. She will marry somebody, and she will not have a will of her own—at least not *such* a will of her own. There is one way,’ Mrs. Mountford added with a laugh, ‘in which things are sometimes put right, Rose. Do you remember Mr. Collins in Miss Austen’s novel? He came to choose a wife among the Miss Bennetts to make up for taking their home from them. I am afraid that happens oftener in novels than in real life. Perhaps,’ she said, laughing again, but with artificial mirth, ‘your cousin Heathcote is coming to look at you girls to see whether he would like one of you for his wife.’

‘I daresay,’ said Rose calmly: ‘that went through my mind too. He would like Anne, of course, if he

could get her; but then Anne—likes somebody else.'

'There are more people than Anne in the world,' said the mother, with some indignation. 'Anne! we all hear so much of Anne that we get to think there is nobody like her. No, my pet, a man of Heathcote Mountford's age— it is not anything like Anne he is thinking of; they don't want tragedy queens at that age; they want youth.'

'You mean, mamma, said Rose, still quite serious, 'that he would like me best.'

'My pet, we don't talk of such things. It is quite time enough when they happen, if they ever happen.'

'But I prefer to talk about them,' said Rose. 'It would be very nice to keep Mount; but then, if Anne had all the money, what would be the good of Mount? We, I mean, could never keep it up.'

'This is going a very long way,' said her mother, amused; 'you must not talk of what most likely will never happen. Besides, there is no telling what changes may take place. Anne has not pleased papa, and no one can say what money she may have and what you may have. That is just what nobody can tell till the time comes.'

'You mean—till papa dies?'

'Oh, Rosie,' said Mrs. Mountford, alarmed, 'don't be so plain-spoken, dear: don't let us think of such a thing. What would become of us if anything happened to dear papa?'

'But it must happen some time,' said Rose, calmly, 'and it will not happen any sooner because we speak of it. I hope he will live a long time, long after we are both married and everything settled. But if one of us was rich, it would not be worth her while to marry Heathcote, unless she was very fond of Mount: and I don't think we are so very fond of Mount.'

And if one of us was poor, it would not be worth *his* while, because he would not be able to keep it up.'

'That is the very best conclusion to come to,' said her mother; 'since it would not be worth while either for the rich one or the poor one, you may put that out of your head and meet him at your ease, as you ought to meet an elderly cousin.'

'Thirty-five is not exactly elderly—for a man,' said Rose, thoughtfully. She did not put the question out of her mind so easily as her mother suggested. 'But I suppose it is time to go and dress,' she added, with a little sigh. 'No Brighton, and winter coming on, and nobody here, not even Willie Ashley. I hope he will be amusing at least,' she said, sighing again, as she went away.

Mrs. Mountford followed slowly with a smile on her face. She was not sorry, on the whole, to have put the idea into her child's head. Even when the Mountfords of Mount had been poor, it was 'a very nice position'—and Heathcote had something, enough to live upon: and Rose would have something. If they 'fancied' each other, worse things might happen. She did not feel inclined to oppose such a consummation. It would be better than marrying Willie Ashley, or—for of course *that* would be out of the question—wanting to marry him. Mrs. Mountford knew by experience what it was for a girl to spend all her youth in the unbroken quiet of a house in the country which was not really a great house. She had been thirty when she married Mr. Mountford, and before that time there had occurred sundry passages, involving at least one ineligible young man, which had not quite passed from her memory. How was it possible to help it?—a girl must do something to amuse herself, to occupy the time that hangs so heavily on her hands. And often, she reflected, before you know what you are doing, it has become serious, and there is no way out of it. As she looked

back she remembered many instances in which this had happened. Better, far better, an elderly cousin with an old though small estate, than the inevitable clergyman or Willie Ashley. And thirty-five, for a man, was not an age to make any objection to.

She went upstairs with her head full of such thoughts, and there once more she found Mrs. Worth, with whom she had held so earnest a colloquy in the corridor, while Saymore opened his heart to his young ladies. Mrs. Worth shook her head when her mistress addressed a question to her. She pinned on the lace pelerine with which it was Mrs. Mountford's pride to make her old dresses look nice for the evening, with many shakings of her head.

'I don't know, ma'am, as I shall ever bring her to hear reason,' Mrs. Worth said. 'I tell her as a good worthy man, and a nice little bit of money, is not for any girl to despise, and many that is her betters would be glad of the chance. But "you can't put an old head on young shoulders," as the saying is, and I don't know as I shall ever bring her to hear reason. There's things as nothing will teach us but experience ma'am,' Mrs. Worth said.

'Well, he *is* old for such a girl, said Mrs. Mountford, candidly; 'we must not be too hard upon her, Worth.'

'Old, ma'am! well, in one way he may be called old,' said the confidential maid; 'but I don't call it half so bad when they're that age as when they're just betwixt and between, both old and young, as you may say. Forty or so, that *is* a worry; but sixty-five you can do with. If I've told her that once I've told her fifty times; but she pays no attention. And when you think what a nice little bit of money he's put away since he's been here, and how respectable he is, and respected by the family; and that she has nothing, poor girl! and nobody but me to look to! I think, if Miss Anne were to speak a word to

her, ma'am, perhaps it would make a difference. They think a deal more of what a young lady says, like themselves, so to speak, than an old person like me.'

CHAPTER XII.

MISTRESS AND MAID.

ANNE had gone upstairs some time before. At this time of her life she liked to be alone, and there were many reasons why solitude should be dear to her. For one thing, those who have just begun to thread the flowery ways of early love have always a great deal to think of. It is an occupation in itself to retrace all that has been done and said, nay, even looked and thought, and to carry this dream of recollection on into the future, adding what shall be to what has been. A girl does not require any other business in life when she has this delightful maze awaiting her, turning her room into a *Vita nuova*, another life which she can enter at her pleasure, shutting impenetrable doors upon all vulgar sights and sounds. In addition to this, which needed no addition, she had something active and positive to occupy her. She had answered Cosmo's letter, thanking him for his offer to deny himself, to be silent if she wished him to be silent. But Anne declared that she had no such wish. 'Do not let us make a folly of our correspondence,' she had written; 'but neither must we deny ourselves this great happiness, dear Cosmo, for the sake of my father. I have told my father that in this point I cannot obey him. I should scorn myself now if I made believe to obey him by giving up such intercourse as we can have. He has not asked this, and I think it would not be honest to offer it. What he wanted was that we should part

altogether, and this we are not going to do. Write to me then, not every day, nor even every week, to make it common, but when your heart is full, and it would be an injustice to keep it from me any longer. And so will I to you.' The bargain, if somewhat highdown, was very like Anne, and on this footing the letters began. Anne very soon felt that her heart was always full, that there was constantly more to say than a sheet of paper could carry; but she held by her own rule, and only broke silence when she could not keep it any longer, which gave to her letters a character of intensity and delicate passion most rare and strange, which touched her lover with an admiration which sometimes had a little awe in it. His own letters were delightful to Anne, but they were of a very different character. They were full of genuine love; for, so far as that went, there was nothing fictitious in his sentiments; but they were steadygoing weekly letters, such as a man pens on a certain day and sends by a certain post, not only to the contentment of his own heart, but in fulfilment of what is expected of him, of what it is indeed his duty to do. This made a great difference; and Cosmo—who was full of intellectual perceptions and saw more clearly than, being not so complete in heart as in mind, it was to his own comfort to see—perceived it very clearly, with an uneasy consciousness of being 'not up to' the lofty strain which was required of him. But Anne, in her innocence and inexperience, perceived it not. His letters were delightful to her. The words seemed to glow and shine before her eyes. If there was a tame expression, a sentence that fell flat, she set it down to that reticence of emotion, that English incapacity for saying all that is felt and tendency to depreciate itself, which we all believe in, and which counts for so much in our estimates of each other. These letters, as I have said, added an

actual something to be done to the entrancing occupation of 'thinking over' all that had happened and was going to happen. Whenever she had a little time to spare, Anne, with her heart beating, opened the little desk in which she kept these two or three precious performances. I think, indeed, she carried the last always about her, to be re-read whenever an occasion occurred: and it was with her heart intent upon this gratification, this secret delight which nobody knew of, that she went into her room, leaving her sister and stepmother still talking over their tea in the hall. More sweet to her than the best of company was this pleasure of sitting alone.

But on this occasion she found herself not alone. Though the dressing-bell would not ring for about an hour, Keziah was already there preparing her young lady's evening toilette. She was standing with her back to the door laying out Anne's dress upon the bed, and crying softly to herself. Keziah was very near Anne's age, and they had been in a manner brought up together, and had known everything that had happened to each other all their lives. This makes a bond between mistress and maid, not common in the ordinary relationships which we form and break so easily. To see Keziah crying was not a matter of indifference to Anne: but neither was it a matter of alarm, for it was not difficult to make Keziah cry. Some one, no doubt, had been scolding the girl; her aunt, who was very strict with her, or the cook, who was half-house-keeper and apt to find fault with the younger servants. Anne stepped forward with her light foot, which Keziah, in her agitation, did not hear, and put her hand on the girl's shoulder. But this, which was done in all kindness, had tragical results. Keziah started violently, and a great big tear, as large as half-a-crown, fell upon the airy skirts of

the dress which she was opening out on the bed. The poor girl uttered a shriek of dismay.

‘Oh, Miss Anne! I didn’t mean it, I didn’t mean it!’ she cried.

‘What is it, Keziah? There is no harm done; but why are you crying? Has anything happened at home? Have you bad news? or is it only Worth that has been cross again?’

‘I’m silly, Miss Anne, that’s what it is,’ said Keziah, drying her eyes. ‘Oh, don’t pity me, please, or I’ll only cry more! Give me a good shaking; that’s what I want, as aunt always says.’

‘Has she been scolding you?’ said Anne. It was not the first time that she had found Keziah in tears; it was not an alarming occurrence, nor did it require a very serious cause.

‘But to think,’ cried the girl, ‘that I should be such a silly, me that ought to know better, as to go and cry upon an Indian muslin, that oughtn’t to go to the wash not for ever so long! Aunt would never forgive me if she knew; and oh, I’m bad enough already without that! If I could only tell you, Miss Anne! Morning or evening she never lets me be. It’s that as makes me so confused, I don’t know what I’m doing. Sometimes I think I’ll just take and marry him, to have done with him and her too.’

‘Marry him? is that what is the matter? It must be some one you don’t like, or you wouldn’t cry so.’

‘It isn’t so much that I don’t like him. If that was all,’ said Keziah, with philosophy, ‘I wouldn’t mind so much. Many a girl has had the same to do. You have to take the bitter with the sweet, as aunt always says.’

‘Keziah!’ exclaimed Anne, with consternation. ‘You wouldn’t mind! then what are you crying for? And why do you try to cheat me into sympathy,’

cried the young lady, indignantly, 'if you don't mind, as you say?'

Keziah by this time had mastered her tears. She had dried the spot carefully and tenderly with a handkerchief, pressing the muslin between two folds.

'Miss Anne,' she said, 'don't you say as I'm cheating, or my heart will break. That is one thing nobody can say of me. I tell him honest that I can't abide him, and if he will have me after that, is it my fault? No, it's not that,' she said shaking her head with the melancholy gravity of superior experience: 'I wasn't thinking just of what I'd like. You ladies do what you please, and when you're crossed, you think the world is coming to an end; but in our class of life, you're brought up to know as you can't have your own way.'

'It is not a question of having your own way. How could you marry a man you did not—love?' cried Anne, full of wrath and indignation, yet with awe of the sacred word she used. Was it too fine a word to be used to little Keziah? The girl gazed at her for a moment, half-roused, half-wondering; then shook her head again.

'Oh, Miss Anne, *love*! a girl couldn't love an old man like that; and he don't look for it, aunt says. And he'd think a deal of me, more than—than others might. It's better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave. And he's got plenty of money—I don't know how much—in the bank; and mother and all of us so poor. He would leave it to me, every penny. You can't just hear that, Miss Anne, can you, and take no notice? There's a deal to be said for him, I don't deny it; and if it was only not being fond of him, I shouldn't mind that.'

'Then you must not ask me to be sorry for you,' said Anne, with stern severity, 'if you could sell yourself for money, Keziah! But, no, no, you could not do it, it is not possible—you, a girl just my age,

and brought up with me. You could not do it, Keziah. You have lived here with me almost all your life.'

'Miss Anne, you don't understand. You've been used to having your own way; but the like of us don't get our own way. And aunt says many a lady does it and never minds. It's not that,' said Keziah, with a fresh outburst of tears. 'I hope as I could do my duty by a man whether I was fond of him or whether I wasn't. No, it isn't that: it's—it's the other one, Miss Anne.'

And here the little girl hid her face in her hands and sobbed; while Anne, her sternness melting in spite of herself, stood looking on with the face of the recording angel, horrified by this new admission and reluctant to write it down.

'Is there—another?' she asked in a whisper of horror.

Keziah uncovered her face; the tone in which she was addressed curdled her blood; she turned her white, little, tear-stained countenance to her mistress with an appalled look of guilt. She had not understood before, poor little girl, how guilty she was. She had not known that it was guilt at all. She was herself standing at the bar, a poor little tremulous criminal in the blaze of Anne's indignant eyes.

'Yes, Miss Anne.' Keziah's voice was almost inaudible; but her eyes kept an astonished appeal in them against the tremendous sentence that seemed to await her.

'Another whom you love. And you would give him up for this man who is rich, who can leave you his money? Keziah! if this were true, do you know what you would deserve? But I cannot believe it is true.'

'Miss Anne!' The poor little culprit regained a little courage; the offence of a mercenary marriage did not touch her conscience, but to be supposed to

be laying claim without reason to a real lover went to her heart. 'Miss Anne; it's quite true. We were always sweethearts, always since we were little things. Him and me: we've always kept company. It's as true—as true! Nobody can say different,' cried the girl, with a fresh burst of angry tears. 'You have seen him yourself, Miss Anne; and all the village knows. Ask aunt, if you don't believe me; ask anyone. We're as well known to be keeping company, as well known—as the Beeches on Mount Hill.'

'That is not what I mean, Keziah. What I can't believe is that you could make up your mind to—marry the man who is rich. What! leave the other whom you love, and marry one whom you don't love! However rich he was, you would be miserable; and he, poor fellow! would be miserable too.'

'Oh, Miss Anne, that's what I am afraid of!' cried the girl; 'that's what I'm always saying to myself. I could face it if it were only me—for it's a great thing to be well off, Miss Anne, for us as have been so poor all our lives); but Jim will be miserable; that is what I always say. But what can I do? tell me what can I do.'

'I will tell you what you can do. Be faithful to Jim, Keziah; be faithful to him whatever anyone says. Marry him, not the other. That is the only thing to do.'

'Marry him? But how can I marry him when he's enlisted and gone off for a soldier, and maybe I'll never see him more?'

'Enlisted!' said Anne, for the moment taken aback; but she recovered quickly, seeing the easiest way out of it. 'Soldiers are allowed to buy themselves out. I would rather a great deal do without a dress and give you the money for his discharge. Anything would be better than to see you sacrifice

yourself—sell yourself. Oh, you could not do it! You must not think of it any more.'

'It's not me, Miss Anne,' said Keziah, mournfully; 'it's Mr. Saymore and aunt.'

'Old Saymore! is it old Saymore?' Anne did not know how to speak with ordinary patience of such a horrible transaction. 'Keziah, this cannot be put up with for a moment. If they frighten you, I will speak to them. Old Saymore! No, Keziah; it is Jim you must marry, since you love him: and no one else.'

'Yes, Miss Anne,' said Keziah, very doubtfully; 'but I don't know,' she added, 'whether Jim wanted me—to marry him. You see he is young, and he had nothing but his weekly wage, when he was in work; and I don't even know if he wants to buy his discharge. Men is very queer,' said the girl, shaking her head with profound conviction, 'and keeping company's not like marrying. Them that haven't got you want you, and them that can have you for the asking don't ask. It is a funny world and men are queer; things is not so straightforward before you to do one or another as you think, Miss Anne.'

'Then, at all events, there is one thing you can always do—for it depends upon yourself alone. Marry no one, but be faithful, Keziah; faithful to Jim if you love him; and, you may be sure, things will come right at the last.'

'I don't know, Miss Anne,' said Keziah, shaking her head; 'it seems as if it ought to; but it don't always, as far as I can see. There's ladies, and real ladies, aunt says, as has just the same before them; for if the man you like hasn't a penny, Miss Anne, and other folks has plenty, what, even if you're a lady, is a girl to do?'

'You can always be faithful, whatever happens,' cried Anne, holding her head high; 'that depends only on yourself.'

‘If your folks will let you alone, Miss Anne.’ Keziah had dried her tears, and Anne’s confidence had given her a little courage; but still she felt that she had more experience of the world than her mistress, and shook her little head.

‘What can your “folks” do, Keziah? You have only to hold fast and be true,’ cried Anne. Her eyes shone with the faith and constancy that were in her. The very sight of her was inspiring. She looked like a woman who might have rallied an army, standing up with her head high, defying all danger. ‘They may make you unhappy, they may take everything from you; but only yourself can change you. The whole world cannot do anything to you if you remain true, and stand fast——’

‘Oh, Miss Anne, if we was all like you!’ said the girl, admiring but despondent. But just then the dressing-bell began to ring, and poor Keziah was recalled to her duties. She flew to the drawers and wardrobes to lay out the miscellaneous articles that were needed—the evening shoes, the ribbons, and little ornaments Anne was to wear. Then she lingered for a moment before fulfilling the same office for Rose. ‘Don’t you think, Miss Anne,’ she said, ‘if it comes to *that* at the end: don’t you think I mind for myself. I hope as I’ll do my duty, whoever the man may be. I’m not one to stick to my own way when I see as I can’t get it. It isn’t that I’m *that* bent on pleasing myself——’

‘But Keziah, Keziah!’ cried Anne, provoked, distressed, and disappointed, ‘when this is what you are thinking of, it is your duty to please yourself.’

‘The Bible don’t say so, Miss Anne,’ said Keziah, with a little air of superior wisdom as she went away.

This discussion made the most curious break in Anne’s thoughts; instead of spending the half-hour in blessed solitude, reading over Cosmo’s last letter

or thinking over some of his last words, how strange it was to be thus plunged into the confused and darkling ways of another world, so unlike her own! To the young lady it was an unalterable canon of faith that marriage was only possible where love existed first. Such was the dogma of the matter in England. the first and most important proviso of the creed of youth, contradicted sometimes in practice, but never shaken in doctrine. It was this that justified and sanctified all the rest, excusing even a hundred little departures from other codes, little frauds and compromises which lost all their guilt when done for the sake of love. But here was another code which was very different, in which the poor little heroine was ashamed to have it thought that, so far as concerned herself, love was the first thing in question. Keziah felt that she could do her duty whoever the man might be; it was not any wish to please herself that made her reluctant. Anne's first impulse of impatience, and annoyance, and disgust at such a view of the question, and at the high ground on which it was held, transported her for the moment out of all sympathy with Keziah. No wonder, she thought, that there was so much trouble and evil deep down below the surface when that was how even an innocent girl considered the matter. But by-and-by Anne's imagination got entangled with the metaphysics of the question, and the clear lines of the old undoubting dogmatism became less clear. 'The Bible don't say so.' What did the Bible say? Nothing at all about it; nothing but a rule of mutual duty on the part of husbands and wives; no guidance for those who were making the first great decision, the choice that must mean happiness or no happiness to their whole lives. But the Bible did say that one was not to seek one's own way, nor care to please one's self, as Keziah said. Was the little maid an unconscious sophist in her

literal adoption of these commands? or was Anne to blame, who, in this point of view, put aside the Bible code altogether, without being aware that she did so? Deny yourself! did that mean that you were to consent to a mercenary union when your heart was against it? Did that mean that you might profane and dishonour yourself for the sake of pleasing others? Keziah thought so, taking the letter as her rule; but how was Anne to think so? Their theories could not have been more different had the width of the world been between them.

And then the story of Heathcote Mountford glanced across her mind. This was what had happened to him. His Italian princess, though she loved him, had done her duty, had married somebody of her own rank, had left the man she loved to bear the desertion as he could. Was it the women who did this, Anne asked herself, while the men were true? It was bitter to the girl to think so, for she was full of that visionary pride—born both of the chivalrous worship and the ceaseless jibes of which they have been the objects—which makes women so sensitive to all that touches their sex. A flush of shame as visionary swept over her. If this cowardly weakness was common to women, then no wonder that men despised them; then, indeed, they must be inferior creatures, incapable of real nobleness, incapable of true understanding. For a moment Anne felt that she despised and hated her own kind; to be so poor, so weak, so miserable; to persuade the nobler, stronger being by their side that they loved him, and then weakly to abandon him; to shrink away from him for fear of a parent's scolding or the loss of money, or comfort, or luxury! What indignation Anne poured forth upon these despicable creatures! and to call it duty! she cried within herself. When you can decide that one side is quite in the wrong, even though it be your own

side, there is consolation in it ; then all is plain sailing in the moral element, and no complication disturbs you. Though she felt it bitter, and humiliating, and shameful, Anne clung to this point of view. She was barely conscious, in the confused panorama of that unknown world that spread around her, of some doubtful points on which the light was not quite so simple and easy to identify. 'Those that can have you for the asking don't ask you,' Keziah said : and she had not been sure that her lover wanted her to marry him, though she believed he would be miserable if she abandoned him. And Heathcote Mountford, though he seemed to be so faithful, had never been rich enough to make inconstancy possible. These were the merest specks of shadow on the full light in which one side of her picture was bathed. But yet they were there.

This made an entire change in Anne's temper and disposition for the evening. Her mind was full of this question. When she went downstairs she suffered a great many stories to be told in her presence to which, on previous occasions, she would have turned a deaf ear ; and it was astonishing how many corresponding cases seem to exist in society—the women 'doing their duty' weakly, giving in to the influence of some mercenary parent, abandoning love and truth for money and luxury ; the men withdrawing embittered, disgusted, no doubt to jibe at women, perhaps to hate them ; to sink out of constancy into misanthropy, into the rusty loneliness of the old bachelor. Her heart grew sad within her as she pondered. Was it to be her fate to vindicate all women, to show what a woman could do ? but for the moment she felt herself too deeply disgusted with her sex to think of defending them from any attack. To be sure, there was that shadow in her picture, that fluctuation, that uncomfortable balance of which she was just conscious—Jim who, perhaps, would not have wanted

to marry Keziah, though he loved her ; and the others who could not afford to commit any imprudence, who could marry only when there was a fortune on what Mrs. Mountford would call ‘the other side.’ Anne felt herself cooped in, in the narrowest space, not knowing where to turn ; ‘who could marry only when there was money on the other side.’ Why, this had been said of Cosmo ! Anne laughed to herself, with an indignation and wrath, slightly, very slightly, tempered by amusement. Where Cosmo was concerned she could not tolerate even a smile.

CHAPTER XIII.

HEATHCOTE MOUNTFORD.

THE visit of the unknown cousin had thus become a very interesting event to the whole household, though less, perhaps, to its head than to anyone else. Mr. Mountford flattered himself that he had nothing of a man’s natural repugnance towards his heir. Had that heir been five-and-twenty, full of the triumph and confidence of youth, then indeed it might have been difficult to treat him with the same easy tolerance ; for, whatever may be the chances in your own favour, it would be difficult to believe that a young man of twenty-five would not, one way or the other, manage to outlive yourself at sixty. But Heathcote Mountford had lived, his kinsman thought, very nearly as long as himself ; he had not been a young man for these dozen years. It was half a lifetime since there had been that silly story about the Italian lady. Nothing can be more easy than to add on a few years to the vague estimate of age which we all form in respect to our neighbours ; the fellow must be forty if he was a day ; and between forty

and sixty after all there is so little difference, especially when he of forty is an old bachelor of habits perhaps not too regular or virtuous. Mr. Mountford was one of the people who habitually disbelieve in the virtue of their neighbours. He had never been a man about town, a frequenter of the clubs, in his own person; and there was, perhaps, a spice of envy in the very bad opinion which he entertained of such persons. A man of forty used up by late hours and doubtful habits is not younger—is as a matter of fact older—than a respectable married man of sixty taking every care of himself, and regular as clock-work in all his ways. Therefore he looked with good-humoured tolerance on Heathcote, at whose rights under the entail he was almost inclined to laugh. ‘I shall see them all out,’ he said to himself—may he even permitted himself to say this to his wife, which was going perhaps too far. Heathcote, to be sure, had a younger brother; but then he was well known to be a delicate, consumptive boy.

To the ladies of the family he was more interesting, for various reasons. Rose and her mother regarded him with perfectly simple and uncomplicated views. If he should happen to prove agreeable, if things fitted in and came right, why then—the arrangement was one which might have its advantages. The original estate of Mount which was comprehended in the entail was not a large one, but still it was not unworthy consideration, especially when *he* had a little and *she* had a little besides. Anne, it need not be said, took no such serious contingency into her thoughts. But she too looked for Heathcote’s arrival with curiosity, almost with anxiety. He was one who had been as she now was, and who had fallen—fallen from that high estate. He had been loved—as Anne felt herself to be loved; but he had been betrayed. She thought with awe of the anguish, the horror of unwilling conviction, the

dying out of all beauty and glory from the world, which it must have been his to experience. And he had lived long years since then, on this changed earth, under these changed skies. She began to long to see him with a fervour of curiosity which was mingled with pity and sympathy, and yet a certain touch of delicate scorn. How could he have lived after, lived so long, sunk (no doubt) into a dreamy routine of living, as if mere existence was worth retaining without hope or love? She was more curious about him than she had ever been about any visitor before, with perhaps a far-off consciousness that all this might happen to herself, mingling with the vehement conviction that it never could happen, that she was as far above it and secure from it as heaven is from the tempests and troubles of earth.

The much-expected visitor arrived in the twilight of an October evening just before dinner, and his first introduction to the family was in the indistinct light of the fire—one of the first fires of the season, which lighted up the drawing-room with a fitful ruddy blaze shining upon the white dresses of the girls, but scarcely revealing the elder people in their darker garments. A man in evening dress very often looks his best: but he does not look romantic—he does not look like a hero—the details of his appearance are too much like those of everybody else. Anne, looking at him breathlessly, trying to get a satisfactory impression of him when the light leaped up for a moment, found him too vigorous, too large, too life-like for her fastidious fancy; but Rose was made perfectly happy by the appearance of a man with whom it would not be at all necessary, she thought, to be upon stilts. The sound of his voice when he spoke dispersed ever so many visions. It was not too serious, as the younger sister had feared. It had not the lofty composure which the elder had

hoped. He gave his arm to Mrs. Mountford with the air of a man not the least detached from his fellow-creatures. 'There will be a frost to-night,' he said; 'it is very cold outside; but it is worth while being out in the cold to come into a cosy room like this.' Charley Ashley would have said the very same had it been he who had walked up to dinner from the rectory. Heathcote had not been in the house for years, not perhaps ever since all *that* had happened, yet he spoke about the cosy room like any chance visitor. It would not be too much to say that there was a certain disgust in the revulsion with which Anne turned from him, though no doubt it was premature to pass judgment on him in the first five minutes like this.

In the light of the dining-room all mystery departed, and he was seen as he was. A tall man, strong, and well developed, with dark and very curly hair tinged all about his temples with grey; his lips smiling, his eyes somewhat serious, though kindling now and then with a habit of turning quickly round upon the person he was addressing. Four pairs of eyes were turned upon him with great curiosity as he took his seat at Mrs. Mountford's side; two of them were satisfied, two not so. This, Mr. Mountford felt, was not the rusty and irregular man about town, for whom he had felt a contempt; still he was turning grey, which shows a feeble constitution. At sixty the master of Mount had not a grey hair in his head. As for Anne, this grey hair was the only satisfactory thing about him. She was not foolish enough to conclude that it must have turned so in a single night. But she felt that this at least was what might be expected. She was at the opposite side of the table, and could not but give a great deal of her attention to him. His hair curled in sheer wantonness of life and vigour, though it was grey; his voice was round, and strong, and melodious. As

he sat opposite to her he smiled and talked, and looked like a person who enjoyed his life. Anne for her own part scarcely took any part in the conversation at all. For the first time she threw back her thoughts upon the Italian princess whom she had so scorned and condemned. Perhaps, after all, it was not she who had suffered the least. Anne conjured up a picture of that forlorn lady sitting somewhere in a dim solitary room in the heart of a great silent palace, thinking over that episode of her youth. Perhaps it was not she, after all, that was so much in the wrong.

‘I started from Sandhurst only this morning,’ he was saying, ‘after committing all kinds of follies with the boys. Imagine a respectable person of my years playing football! I thought they would have knocked all the breath out of me: yet you see I have survived. The young fellows had a match with men far too strong for them—and I used to have some little reputation that way in old days——’

‘Oh, yes, you were a great athlete; you played for Oxford in University matches, and got ever so many goals.’

‘This is startling,’ Heathcote said; ‘I did not know my reputation had travelled before me; it is a pity it is not something better worth remembering. But what do you know about goals, Miss Mountford, if I may make so bold?’

‘Rose,’ said that little person, who was wreathed in smiles; ‘that is Miss Mountford opposite. I am only the youngest. Oh, I heard from Charley Ashley all about it. We know about goals perfectly well, for we used to play ourselves long ago in the holidays with Charley and Willie—till mamma put a stop to it,’ Rose added, with a sigh.

‘I should think I put a stop to it! You played once, I believe,’ said Mrs. Mountford, with a slight

frown, feeling that this was a quite unnecessary confidence.

‘Oh, much oftener; don’t you recollect, Anne, you played football too, and you were capital, the boys said?’

Now Anne was, in fact, much troubled by this revelation. She, in her present superlative condition, walking about in a halo of higher things, to be presented to a stranger who was not a stranger, and, no doubt, would soon hear all about her, as a football player, a girl who was athletic, a tom-boy, neither less nor more! She was about to reply with annoyance, when the ludicrous aspect of it suddenly struck her, and she burst into a laugh in spite of herself. ‘There is such a thing as an inconvenient memory,’ she said. ‘I am not proud of playing football now.’

‘I am not at all ashamed of it,’ said Rose. ‘I never should have known what a goal was if I hadn’t played. Do you play tennis, *too*, Mr. Heathcote? It is not too cold if you are fond of it. Charley said you were good at anything—good all round, he said.’

‘That is a very flattering reputation, and you must let me thank Mr. Charley, whoever he is, for sounding my trumpet. But all that was a hundred years ago,’ Heathcote said; and this made up a little lost ground for him with Anne, for she thought she heard something like a sigh.

‘You will like to try the covers,’ said Mr. Mountford. ‘I go out very little myself now-a-days, and I daresay you begin to feel the damp, too. I don’t preserve so much as I should like to do; these girls are always interfering with their false notions; but, all the same, I can promise you a few days’ sport.’

‘Is it the partridges or the poachers that the young ladies patronise?’ Heathcote said.

‘My dear,’ said Mrs. Mountford, ‘what is the

use of calling attention to Anne's crotchets? She has her own way of thinking, Mr. Heathcote. I tell her she must never marry a sportsman. But, indeed, she has a great deal to say for herself. It does not seem half so silly when you hear what she has got to say.'

Anne presented a somewhat indignant countenance to the laughing glance of the new cousin. She would not be drawn into saying anything in her own defence.

'You will find a little sport, all the same,' said Mr. Mountford; 'but I go out very seldom myself; and I should think you must be beginning to feel the damp, too.'

'Not much,' said the younger man, with a laugh. He was not only athletic and muscular, but conscious of his strength, and somewhat proud of it. The vigour in him seemed an affront to all Anne's preconceived ideas, as it was to her father's comfortable conviction of the heir's elderliness; his very looks seemed to cast defiance at these two discomfited critics. That poor lady in the Italian palace! it could not have been she that was so much in the wrong, after all.

'I like him very much, mamma,' cried Rose, when they got into the drawing-room; 'I like him immensely: he is one of the very nicest men I ever saw. Do let us make use of him now he is here. Don't you know that dance you always promised us?—let us have the dance while Heathcote is here. Old! who said he was old? he is delightful; and so nice-looking, and such pretty curly hair.'

'Hush, my pet, do not be too rapturous; he is very nice, I don't deny; but still, let us see how he bears a longer inspection; one hour at dinner is not enough to form an opinion. How do you like your cousin Heathcote, Anne?'

'He is not at all what I expected,' Anne said.

‘She expected a Don Quixote; she expected a Lord Byron, with his collar turned down; somebody that talked nothing but poetry. I am so glad,’ said Rose, ‘he is not like that. I shall not mind Mount going to Heathcote now. He is just my kind of man, not Anne’s at all.’

‘No, he is not Anne’s kind,’ said the mother.

Anne did not say anything. She agreed in their verdict; evidently Heathcote was one of those disappointments of which before she met Cosmo the world had been full. Many people had excited generally her curiosity, if not in the same yet in a similar way, and these had disappointed her altogether. She did not blame Heathcote. If he was unable to perceive his own position in the world, and the attitude that was befitting to him, possibly it was not his fault. Very likely it was not his fault; most probably he did not know any better. You cannot expect a man to act contrary to his nature, Anne said to herself; and she gave up Heathcote with a little gentle disdain. This disdain is the very soul of toleration. It is so much more easy to put up with the differences, the discrepancies, of other people’s belief or practice, when you find them inferior, not to be judged by your standards. This was what Anne did. She was not angry with him for not being the Heathcote she had looked for. She was tolerant: he knew no better; if you look for gold in a pebble, it is not the pebble’s fault if you do not find it. This was the mistake she had made. She went to the other end of the room where candles were burning on a table and chairs set out around. It was out of reach of all the chatter about Heathcote in which she did not agree. She took a book, and set it up before her to make a screen before her gaze, and, thus defended, went off at once into her private sanctuary and thought of Cosmo. Never was there a transformation scene more easily

managed. The walls of the Mount drawing-room divided, they gave place to a group of the beeches, with two figures seated underneath, or to a bit of the commonplace road, but no longer commonplace—a road that led to the Manor. What right had a girl to grumble at her companions, or any of their ways, when she could escape in the twinkling of an eye into some such beautiful place, into some such heavenly company, which was all her own? But yet there would come back occasionally, as through a glass, an image of the Italian lady upon whom she had been so hard a little while before. Poor Italian lady! evidently, after all, Heathcote's life had not been blighted. Had she, perhaps, instead of injuring him only blighted her own?

The softly-lighted room, the interchange of soft voices at one end, the figure at the other intent upon a book, lighting up eyes full of dreams, seemed a sort of enchanted vision of home to Heathcote Mountford when, after an interval, he came in alone, hesitating a little as he crossed the threshold. He was not used to home. A long time ago his own house had been closed up at the death of his mother—not so much closed up but that now and then he went to it with a friend or two, establishing their bachelorhood in the old faded library and drawing-room, which could be smoked in, and had few associations. But the woman's part of the place was all shut up, and he was not used to any woman's part in his life. This, however, was all feminine; he went in as to an enchanted castle. Even Mrs. Mountford, who was commonplace enough, and little Rose, who was a pretty little girl and no more, seemed wonderful creatures to him who had dropped out of acquaintance with such creatures; and the elder daughter was something more. He felt a little shy, middle-aged as he was, as he went in. And this place had many associations; one time or other it

would be his own; one time or other it might come to pass that he, like his old kinsman, would pass by the drawing-room, and prefer the ease of the library, his own chair and his papers. At this idea he laughed within himself, and went up to Mrs. Mountford on her sofa, who stopped talking when she saw who it was.

‘Mr. Mountford has gone to his own room. I was to tell you he has something to do.’

‘Oh, papa has always an excuse!’ cried Rose; ‘he never comes here in the evening. I am sure this room is far nicer, and we are far nicer, than sitting there all by himself among those musty books. And he never reads them even! he puts on his dressing-gown and sits at his ease——’

‘Hush, you silly child! When a gentleman comes to be papa’s age he can’t be expected to care for the company of girls, even when they are his own. I will take my work and sit with him by-and-by. You must not give your cousin reason to think that you are undutiful to papa.’

‘Oh, never mind!’ said Rose; ‘Mr. Heathcote, come, and be on my side against mamma. It is so seldom we have gentlemen staying here—indeed, there are very few gentlemen in the county—there are daughters, nothing but daughters, in most of the houses. And mamma has promised us a dance whenever we could get enough men. I want her to give it while you are here.’

‘While I am here; but you don’t suppose I am a dancing man?’

‘You can dance, I am sure,’ said Rose. ‘I can see it in your face; and then you would make acquaintance with all the neighbours. It would be dreadful when you come to live here after our time if you do not know a soul. You must make acquaintance with everybody; and it would be far more fun to have a ball than a quantity of dreary

dinner-parties. Do come here and be on my side against mamma!’

‘How can I be against my kind kinswoman,’ he said laughing, ‘who has taken me in and received me so graciously, though I belong to the other branch? That would be ingratitude of the basest sort.’

‘Then you must be against me,’ said Rose.

‘That would be impossible!’ he said, with another laugh; and drew his chair close to the table and threw himself into the discussion. Rose’s bright little countenance lighted up, her blue eyes shone, her cheeks glowed. She got a piece of paper and a pencil, and began to reckon up who could be invited. ‘The men first,’ she said, with the deepest gravity, furtively applying her pencil to her lips to make it mark the blacker as in old school-room days; ‘the men must go down first, for we are always sure of plenty of girls—but you cannot have a dance without men. First of all, I will put down you. You are one to start with—Mr. Heathcote Mountford; how funny it is to have a gentleman of the same name, who is not papa!’

‘Ab! that is because you never had a brother!’ said Mrs. Mountford, with a sigh; ‘it never seemed at all strange to us at home. I beg your pardon, I am sure, Mr. Heathcote; of course it would have interfered with you; but for girls not to have a brother is sad for them, poor things! It always makes a great deal of difference in a girl’s life.’

‘What am I to say?’ asked Heathcote. ‘I am very sorry, but—how can I be sorry when I have just become conscious of my privileges; it is an extremely pleasant thing to step into this vacant post.’

‘A second cousin is not like a brother,’ said Rose; ‘but, anyhow, at a dance you would be the man of the house. And you do dance? if you don’t

you must learn before the ball. We will teach you, Anne and I.'

'I can dance a little, but I have no doubt lessons would do me good. Now go on; I want to see my comrades and coadjutors.'

Rose paused with her pencil in her hand. 'Mr. Heathcote Mountford, that is one; that is a great thing to begin with. And then there is—then there is—who shall I put down next? who is there else, mamma? Of course Charley Ashley; but he is a clergyman, he scarcely counts. That is why a garden-party is better than a dance in the country, because the clergymen all count for that. I think there is somebody staying with the Woodheads, and there is sure to be half-a-dozen at Meadowlands; shall I put down six for Meadowlands? They must invite some one if they have not so many; all our friends must invite some one—we must insist upon it,' Rose said.

'My dear, that is always the difficulty; you know that is why we have had to give it up so often. In the vacation there is Willie Ashley; he is always somebody.'

'He must come,' cried Rose, energetically, 'for three days—that will be enough—for three days; Charley must write and tell him. And then there is—who is there more, mamma? Mr. Heathcote Mountford, that is an excellent beginning, and he is an excellent dancer, and will go on all the evening through, and dance with everybody. Still, we cannot give a ball with only one man.'

'I will send for my brother and some more of those young fellows from Sandhurst, Mrs. Mountford, if you can put them up.'

'If we can put them up!' Rose all but threw herself into the arms of this new cousin, her eyes all but filled with tears of gratitude. She gave a little shriek of eagerness—'Of course we can put them up;

oh! as many as ever you please, as many as you can get:—shall I put down twenty for Sandhurst? Now we have a real ball in a moment,’ said Rose, with enthusiasm. It had been the object of her desires all her life.

‘Does Miss Mountford take no interest in the dance?’ Heathcote asked.

‘Anne? Oh, she will take it up when it comes near the time. She will do a great deal; she will arrange everything; but she does not take any pleasure in planning; and then,’ said Rose, dropping her voice to a whisper—‘Hush! don’t look to make her think we are talking of her; she does not like to be talked of—Mr. Heathcote! Anne is—engaged.’

‘My dear child!’ cried her mother. ‘Mr. Heathcote, this is all nonsense; you must not pay the least attention to what this silly child says. Engaged!—what folly, Rose! you know your sister is nothing of the kind. It is nothing but imagination; it is only your nonsense, it is——’

‘You wouldn’t dare, mamma, to say that to Anne,’ said Rose, with a very solemn face.

‘Dare! I hope I should dare to say anything to Anne. Mr. Heathcote will think we are a strange family when the mother wouldn’t *dare* to say anything to the daughter, and her own child taunts her with it. I don’t know what Mr. Heathcote would think of us,’ said Mrs Mountford, vehemently, ‘if he believed what you said.’

‘I do not think anything but what you tell me,’ said Heathcote, endeavouring to smooth the troubled waters. ‘I know there are family difficulties everywhere. Pray don’t think of making explanations. I am sure whatever you do will be kind, and whatever Miss Mountford does will spring from a generous heart. One needs only to look at her to see that.’

Neither of the ladies thought he had paid any

attention to Anne, and they were surprised—for it had not occurred to them that Anne, preoccupied as she was, could have any interest for the new comer. They were startled by the quite unbounded confidence in Anne which he thus took it upon him to profess. They exchanged looks of surprise. 'Yes, Anne has a generous heart—no one can deny that,' Mrs. Mountford said. It was in the tone of a half-unwilling admission, but it was all the more effective on that account. Anne had listened to their voices, half-pleased thus to escape interruption, half-disgusted to have more and more proofs of the frivolity of the new comer: she had heard a sentence now and then, an exclamation from Rose, and had been much amused by them. She was more startled by the cessation of the sounds, by the sudden fall, the whispering, the undertones, than by the conversation. What could they be talking of now, and why should they whisper as if there were secrets in hand? Next minute, however, when she was almost roused to the point of getting up to see what it was, Mrs. Mountford's voice became audible again.

'Do you sing now, Mr. Heathcote? I remember long ago you used to have a charming voice!'

'I don't know that it was ever very charming; but such as it is I have the remains of it,' he said.

'Then come and sing something,' said Mrs. Mountford. What was it they had been saying which broke off so suddenly, and occasioned this jump to a different subject? But Anne composed herself to her dreams again, when she saw the group moving towards the piano. He sang, too, then! sang and danced and played football, after what had happened to him? Decidedly, the Italian princess must have had much to be said on her side.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SPECTATOR'S VIEW.

A FEW days passed, and the new cousin continued to be very popular at Mount. Mrs. Mountford made no secret of her liking for him.

‘Of course,’ she said, ‘I was never partial to the other branch, especially having no son myself. The Mount family has never liked them. Though they have always been poor, they have claimed to be the elder branch, and when your property is to go away from you without any fault of yours, naturally you are not fond of those to whom it goes. But with Heathcote one forgets all these prejudices. He is so thoroughly nice, he is so affectionate. He has no family of his own (unless you call his delicate brother a family), and anyone can see how he likes ladies’ society. Mr. Mountford thinks as much of him as we do. I quite look forward to introducing him to our friends; and I hope he may get to be popular in the county, for now that we have made such friends with him, he will be often here I trust.’

Such was the excellent opinion his cousin’s wife expressed of him. It is needless to say that her neighbours imputed motives to poor Mrs. Mountford, and jumped at the cause of her partiality. ‘She means him to marry Rose,’ everybody said; and some applauded her prudence; and some denounced her selfishness in sacrificing Rose to a man old enough to be her father; but, on the whole, the county approved both the man himself and the opportunity of making his acquaintance. He was asked to dinner at Meadowlands, which was all that could be desired for any visitor in the neighbourhood. The Mountfords felt that they had done their utmost

for any guest of theirs when they had procured them this gratification. And Lord Meadowlands quite 'took to' Heathcote. This was the best thing that could happen to anyone new to the county, the sort of thing on which the other members of society congratulated each other when the neophyte was a favourite, taking each other into corners and saying: 'He has been a great deal at the Castle,' or 'He has been taken up by Lord Meadowlands.' Thus the reception given to the heir of entail was in every way satisfactory, and even Mr. Mountford himself got to like him. The only one who kept aloof was Anne, who was at this moment very much preoccupied with her own thoughts; but it was not from any dislike to the new member of the household. He had not fulfilled her expectations. But that most probably was not his fault. And, granting the utter want of delicate perception in him, and understanding of the rôle which ought to have been his in the circumstances, Anne, after a few days, came to think tolerably well of her new kinsman. He was intelligent: he could talk of things which the others rejected as nonsense or condemned as highflown. On the question of the cottages, for instance, he had shown great good sense; and on the whole, though with indifference, Anne conceded a general approval to him. But they did not draw together, or so at least the other members of the family thought. Rose monopolised him when he was in the drawing-room. She challenged him at every turn, as a very young and innocent girl may do, out of mere high spirits, without conscious coquetry at least: she contradicted him and defied him, and adopted his opinions and scoffed at them by turns, keeping him occupied, with an instinctive art which was quite artless, and meant 'fun' more than anything serious. At all this pretty play Anne looked on without seeing it, having her head full of other things. And

the mother looked on, half-afraid, half-disapproving (as being herself of a stricter school and older fashion), yet not sufficiently afraid or displeased to interfere ; while Heathcote himself was amused, and did not object to the kittenish sport of the pretty little girl, whose father (he said to himself) he might have been, so far as age went. But he kept an eye, notwithstanding, on 'the other girl,' whom he did not understand. That she was 'engaged,' and yet not permitted to be spoken of as 'engaged'—that there was some mystery about her—was evident. A suspicion of a hidden story excites every observer. Heathcote wanted to find it out, as all of us would have done. As for himself, he was not incapable of higher sentiments, though Anne had easily set him down as being so : but his experiences had not been confined to one romantic episode, as she, in her youthful ignorance, had supposed. The story was true enough, but with a difference. The Italian princess was not a noble lady compelled to wed in her own rank and relinquish her young Englishman, as Mrs. Mountford had recounted it, but a poor girl of much homelier gentility, whose lot had been fixed long before Heathcote traversed her simple path, and who fulfilled that lot with a few tears but not very much reluctance, much more in the spirit of Keziah than of Anne. Heathcote himself looked back upon the little incident with a smile. He would have gone to the ends of the earth to serve her had she wanted his help, but he did not regret that Antonia had not been his wife all these years. Perhaps he would have required a moment's reflection to think what anyone could mean who referred to this story. But even the fact that such an episode was of no special importance in his life would have been against him with Anne in the present state of her thoughts. She would not have allowed it as possible or right that a man should have gone beyond the simplicity

of such an incident. In her experience love was as yet the first great fact, the one enlightener, awakener of existence. It had changed her own life from the foundation, nay, had given her an individual, separate life, as she fondly thought, such as, without this enchantment, no one could have. But Heathcote had lived a great deal longer, had seen a great deal more. He had been 'knocked about,' as people say. He had seen the futility of a great many things upon which simple people set their hopes; he had come to be not very solicitous about much which seems deeply important to youth. Thirty-five had worked upon him its usual influence. But of all this Anne knew nothing, and she put him aside as a problem not worth solution, as a being whose deficiencies were deficiencies of nature. She was more interesting to him. She was the only one of the house who was not evident on the surface. And his interest was stimulated by natural curiosity. He wanted to know what the story was which the child-sister referred to so frankly, which the mother wanted to ignore. There was even a something in the intercourse between Anne and her father which caught his attention. They were on perfectly good terms—but what was it? He was a man who took things as they came, who did not feel a very profound interest in anything—save one thing. But this little mystery reflected in Anne's serious eyes, and pervading the house with a sense of something not apparent, roused the dormant sentiment more than he could have thought possible.

The one thing that interested Heathcote Mountford to the bottom of his heart was his young brother, for whom he had a tender, semi-parental passion, preferring his concerns above everything else in the world. It was this, indeed, which had brought him to Mount with a proposal which he could not but feel that Mr. Mountford would grasp

at. He had come to offer to his predecessor in the entail that they should join together and break it—a singular step for an heir in his position to take. But as yet he had said nothing about this chief object of his visit. When he formed the project it had not cost him much. What did he want with an estate and a big house to keep up, he had said to himself in the snugness of his bachelor's chambers, so much more comfortable than Mount, or any other such big barrack of a place could ever be made? He had already a shabby old house to which he went now and then to shoot, and which—because Edward (not to speak of himself) had been born in it, and their mother had died in it, as well as many generations of Edwards and Heathcotes in the past—could not be done away with, however melancholy and dismal it might get to be. But Mount had no associations for him. Why should not St. John's girls have it, as was just and natural? The Mountfords of Mount were not anything so very great that heaven and earth should be moved to keep them up. Besides, he would not be of much use in keeping them up; he never meant to marry (not because of Antonia, but probably because of 'knocking about' and forgetting that any one thing in the world was more important than any other), and Edward was delicate, and there was no telling what the boy might do;—far better to have a good sum of money, to set that wayward fellow above the reach of trouble, and leave it to St. John's girls to provide for the race. No doubt they would do that fast enough. They would marry, and their children could take the name. Thus he had his plans all cut and dry before he reached Mount. But when he got there, either the reserve of Mr. Mountford's manner, or some certain charm in the place which he had not anticipated, deferred the execution of it. He thought it over and arranged all the details during each day's shooting, notwith-

standing that the gamekeepers insisted all the time on discoursing with him upon the estate, and pointing out what should be done under a new reign which the present master did not care to have done ; but in the evening he was too tired (he said to himself) to open so important a subject ; and thus day after day went on. Perhaps the discourses even of the gamekeepers, and their eagerness to point out to him the evils that were to be amended at presumably the not very distant period when a new monarch should reign, and the welcome he received from the people he met, and the success he had at Meadowlands, and the interest which he excited in the county, had something to do with the disinclination to open the subject which seemed to have crept upon him ; or probably it was only laziness. This was the reason which he assigned to himself—indolence of mind, which was one of his besetting sins he knew. But, anyhow, whatever was the cause, he had as yet said nothing on the subject. He had accepted all the allusions that were made to his future connection with the county, and the overtures of friendship ; and he had owned himself flattered by the attentions of Lord Meadowlands : everything had gone indeed precisely as things might have gone had he fully accepted his position as heir of the Mountfords. Nobody for a moment doubted that position : and still he did nothing to undeceive them, nothing to show his real disinclination to assume the burden of the ownership of Mount. Was he really so disinclined to accept it ? After this week of the new life his head seemed confused on the subject, and he was not quite so sure.

But all the same he felt instinctively that Anne would make a far better squire than he should. He had gone through the village with the girls, and he had seen how everything centred in Anne. Though there was (he thought) a certain severity in her, the village people evidently did not feel it. They were

more at home with her than even with her little sister. The rector came up to her in the street, and put his arm within hers, and led her away to see something which had to be done, with a mixture of authority and appeal which touched the looker-on. Mr. Ashley was old and feeble, and there was something pretty in the way in which he supported himself at once physically and morally on the young, slim, elastic strength of the girl, who was the natural born princess of the place. At the schools she was supreme. Wherever she went, it was evidently recognised that she was the representative at once of law and of power. Heathcote, who had not been used to it, looked upon her with surprise and a wondering admiration. 'You are in great demand,' he said. 'You have a great deal to do. You seem to have the government of the place in your hands.'

'Papa is not so active as he used to be,' Anne said. 'Besides, there are so many little things which come more naturally to me.'

'You are princess regent,' he said: 'I see; you act for the king, but you are more than the king. A man could never do that.'

'Men can do a great deal more than women in everything,' said Anne, with decision.

'Oh! can they? I should not have said so; but no doubt you know best.'

'If they cannot, what is the meaning of everything that is said in the world, Mr. Heathcote? you would have to change the entire language. We are never supposed to be good for anything. What is life to us is supposed to be an amusement to you.'

'This is a new light,' said Heathcote, somewhat startled. He had no idea that it was poor Antonia, the mother of half a dozen children, who was in Anne's mind all the time.

'Anne, don't! Mamma says you should never talk like that to gentlemen; they will think you go

in for women's rights and all sorts of horrible things. She doesn't, cousin Heathcote. She only wants to make you stare.'

'I think I go in for everybody's rights; I don't mind whether they are women or men,' said Anne. 'Mrs. Fisher, what is the matter? The children don't come to school, and Johnny has left the choir. There must be some reason for all that.'

'Miss Anne,' said the woman, with a smirk and a curtsey, 'Johnny's been in the rectory kitchen learning to be a boy. Mr. Douglas, miss, that was stopping at the rectory, took a fancy to him, and old Simes is a-training of him. Mr. Douglas—that's the gentleman—is going to have him at his house in town, Miss Anne. You knows him, Johnny says.'

At this Rose gave vent to a suppressed giggle, and the woman smirked more broadly than ever. But these signs might not have caught the attention of Heathcote but for the violent flush which he saw overspread Anne's face. His attention was roused on the moment.

'Mr. Douglas has been gone for some time,' he heard Anne say. A note had got into her voice that had not been there before—a softness, a roundness, a melting of the tones. Mr. Douglas!—who was he? Heathcote said who was the fellow? within himself with an instinctive opposition. 'The fellow' had nothing whatever to do with him, yet he disliked him at once.

'Yes, Miss Anne; but Johnny has been in the rectory kitchen a-training ever since the gentleman went away.'

Anne made the woman a little friendly sign with her hand and went on. She did not pursue her inquiries as officer of the school any more: she accepted the excuse, though it was no excuse; which showed, he said to himself with a smile, how efficient female officers of school boards would be. Perhaps

she was half humbled by this evidence of being too easily satisfied. She volunteered a profession of her faith.

‘I do not approve of too stringent measures: you ought not to set up one arbitrary rule; you ought to take the circumstances into consideration.’ All this was said with a little heat. ‘I suppose why school boards have been so unpopular where they exist is very much because of that.’

Again a little giggle escaped from the bosom of Rose; but it was quickly suppressed. She gave Heathcote a significant look, as Anne was stopped by some one else who wanted to speak to her. ‘That was the gentleman,’ Rose whispered, with mischievous delight.

Well, if it was the gentleman! Heathcote thought, he was a lucky fellow; but the idea of giving up Mount was from that moment less pleasant, he could scarcely tell why. He did not relish the notion of some fellow called Douglas, probably some Scotsman who would not part with his very ordinary name for a king’s ransom, coming into possession of the old place. Who was Douglas? On the whole, Heathcote for the first time acknowledged to himself that there might be two sides to the question, and that there was something wrong and faithless in separating the old name of Mountford and the male heir from Mount.

Next day, however, by accident further light was thrown to him on this question. The principal post came in at noon, and it was the habit of the house that the letters which came by it should be ranged upon one of the tables in the hall, in little heaps, where their respective owners found them. Coming in to get his share of the budget, Heathcote found that Mr. Mountford was there before him. He had his letters in his left hand, but with his right had taken up another which lay on Anne’s heap. He

was balancing it in his fingers half-contemptuous, half-angry, when Heathcote, with the involuntary indiscretion which so often belongs to the innocent, knowing no reason why anything should be done in secret, paused behind him, and saw at a glance what he was about. It was not anything tragical: Mr. Mountford had no intention of tampering with Anne's letter: but he held it up, and turned it over, and looked at it all round with a look of disgust on his countenance. By this time Heathcote had been awakened to the sense that he was prying into a domestic mystery, he who had no right to do so, and he hastened to gather his own letters from the table. Mrs. Mountford by this time had come in, on the same errand. Her husband held the letter up to her with an indignant 'humph!' 'Do you see? She is keeping it up in spite of all I have said.'

'I don't want to see it,' said the stepmother, nervously; 'put it down. I have nothing to do with Anne's letters, papa!'

And then a sort of sensation spread through the room, he could not tell what, and Heathcote became aware that Anne herself had come in. She walked straight to the table where her father stood, still with her letter in his hand. She recognised it in his hand with a sudden flush of consciousness, and stood facing him, saying nothing, pale now, but with courage, not fear.

'This is for you apparently, Anne; you are keeping up the correspondence whatever I may say.'

'Yes, papa, I am keeping it up.' She put out her hand and took the letter. She made no explanation or excuse; but went away with it, slowly, with a sort of formal dignity. It was a strange little scene. The observer seemed to see the story rising like a picture before him—as Anne had thought she saw his story—but more distinctly as being more near. He was more interested than he could say.

He had no right to inquire into what was so distinctly a family secret. If she only would have confided in him, told him how it was!—but that he had no right to expect. It made a visible commotion in the house for the rest of the day. Little signs of agitation were visible, signs which without this elucidation would only have puzzled, would have conveyed no enlightenment to his mind. Anne did not appear at lunch. She had gone, it was said, to the village, and no doubt had stopped to luncheon with the Woodheads. And Mr. Mountford was gloomy and absent, yet at the same time more alert than usual. ‘I am going to ride over to Hunston this afternoon,’ he announced. ‘Perhaps you would like to go with me, Heathcote, and see the place?’

‘What are you going to do at Hunston, papa? Let me come with you too: let us all go together,’ said Rose.

‘I am going to see Mr. Loseby,’ her father said; and this, though it had no effect upon Rose, made her mother start slightly, and cast an anxious look towards the head of the table.

‘Do you think, St. John, it is a good day to go to Hunston? It is very damp, and I am sure you will make your cold worse.’

Mrs. Mountford was not the soul of generosity: but she was far from being unjust or cruel. She was afraid of what her husband might be going to do, even should it be for the advantage of Rose.

‘I think I can manage to take care of my cold,’ he said.

‘But that is just what gentlemen never do. Don’t go to-day, St. John. Wait till it is drier and brighter;’ she even got up from her chair and went round to him and put her hand on his shoulder. ‘Wait till you have had time to think.’

‘I have taken too much time to think,’ he said crossly, turning away his head and rising from the

table. 'Heathcote, if you would like to come with me, I shall be ready in half-an-hour.'

'What is it, mamma?' said Rose, half frightened too, as her father went out of the room. Mrs. Mountford—the spectator always thought the better of her for it—fell a-crying, without being able to restrain herself, half in real distress, half in nervous excitement. 'Oh, Mr. Heathcote, if you can do anything to smooth him down, do so; I am afraid he is going to—to tamper with his will!' she cried.

CHAPTER XV.

TAMPERING WITH A LAWYER.

THE road to Hunston was a pleasant road. They went through the park first, which was in all the glory of autumn colouring, the oaks and the beeches a wonder to see, and even the slim elms all golden standing up against a blue afternoon sky, in which already there began to appear faint beginnings of purple and crimson as the sun got westward; and after that the road ran between other parks, and more and more wealth of russet or of golden foliage. But Mr. Mountford was not a very entertaining companion. Heathcote when he was 'at home' was in very good society—in society, that is to say, which was agreeable, where there was much talk and great freedom of intercourse, and since he had been at Mount he had found pleasure in the society of the girls, one of whom amused him, while one interested him. Mr. Mountford, however, did neither the one nor the other. He indicated the different houses with his riding-whip as they passed.

'That's Newton-Magna. The Newtons once contested the county with us. My grandfather married a Newton—they are, therefore, connections. This is

where old Lady Prayrey Poule lives. She has just made a ridiculous marriage, of which everybody is talking. I don't know who the man is. There is Meadowlands to the right, and that's young Lassell's place, whom I suppose you have heard of.'

This was the style of his conversation. Sometimes he varied it by giving his kinsman an account of the value of the livings and the goodness of the land.

'It is worth so much an acre on this side of the river, and not half on the other side. The land up my way is generally good, and the livings are excellent. In my parish the living has always been held by a younger son, but naturally there has been no younger son. Ah! you think that Edward;—well, if I had known more of Edward, I might perhaps—but he is quite young; there is plenty of time.'

Between the intervals, however, when he was not engaged with these local details, Mr. Mountford had not much to say. He was not brilliant in himself, and he was preoccupied. He had all the air of a man who was going, as his wife said, to tamper with his will. When his companion spoke to him he gave short answers: his thoughts were somewhere else. When they approached the town he became still more brief in his indications.

'The church is considered fine, I believe, and the High Street is a nice street. I am going to Loseby's, who is my lawyer. He has had all the Mount affairs in his hands since ever I can remember, and much longer—he and his father before him. He'll like to make your acquaintance; but in the meantime I have some business with him. Perhaps you would like to look about the town a little.'

Heathcote said he would like to look about the town, and Mr. Mountford, evidently gathering himself up with an effort, buttoned up a button which had come undone of his coat, and with a very deter-

mined air strode into the lawyer's office. It was part of a tall red brick house, which formed an important feature in the scene, a house with many rows of windows, long and narrow, which twinkled in the setting sun. In Heathcote's mind there was a great deal of mingled curiosity and sympathy. He would have liked to know what was going to happen, to be behind Mr. Loseby's curtains, or in some cupboard full of parchments. There could be no doubt that something affecting Anne's future was in the wind. He laughed at himself, after a moment, to think how much importance, how much gravity he was attaching to it. After all, he said to himself, as Cosmo had done before, tyrannical fathers are a thing of the past—nobody cuts off a child now-a-days with a shilling. No doubt all Mr. Mountford meant was to tie up her money so that no worthless fellow of a husband could get at it. But, though he felt that this was the only reasonable interpretation of Mr. Mountford's mission, yet the various little scenes he had been a witness to made an impression upon his mind in spite of himself. Anne standing grave and simple, facing her father, holding out her hand for her letter, saying, 'Yes, I keep it up'—was it undutiful of the girl? and the father's stern displeasure and the mother's (or step-mother was it? all the more credit to her) excitement and distress. To be sure a family quarrel always threw a house into agitation, even where no great harm was to be looked for. No doubt it was undutiful of the girl. After all, if a parent is not to have influence on that point, where is the use of him? And no doubt she had chosen a man unworthy of her, or such a fuss never would have been made. Heathcote was not a parent, but still he had in some respects the responsibilities of a parent. Edward was delicate—he was not strong enough to fight his way against the world; but he was not

amiable, the quality which ought to belong to all delicate and weakly persons, and which makes up for so many deficiencies. He had strong passions in his weak body. He had already got into various scrapes, out of which his brother had been called upon to draw him. Heathcote had a letter in his pocket now which had given him a great deal of thought. It had drawn him back to his former conviction that Edward's affairs were the most important in the world. It was not in his power by himself to do all that Edward wanted, to secure the boy's comfort, so far as that was possible. He must speak to Mr. Mountford on the ride home. It was not a thing to be neglected any longer. This was the chief thing in his mind as he walked about Hunston, looking into the old church and surveying all the shops. He 'made acquaintance,' as his kinsman had bidden him, with the quiet little county town, with a curious mingling of ideas in his mind. In the first place, he could not but think how many generations of Mountfords had trodden this pavement—ladies in farthingales and men in periwigs, bucks of the Regency, sober politicians of the period of Reform; and by-and-by it would be his own turn—he too in his day would ride in on a steady-going old cob, like St. John Mountford, or drive in the family coach to see his lawyer and his banker and do his business. But no—he contradicted himself with a little confusion—no, this was just what he was not to do. For the moment he had forgotten his own purpose, the object that brought him to the old home of the race—which was to sever himself from it. No, after all, he said to himself with a smile, there was not very much to give up; the pleasure of riding into the county town and receiving the respectful salutations of all the shopkeepers: that was not much. The Albany was a better place to live in, Piccadilly was a little more entertaining

than the High Street. Nevertheless, it was certain that Heathcote felt a pinch of regret when he remembered that the glories of Mount and the greetings of Hunston were not to be his. He laughed, but he did not like it. All the more was it essential that this step should be taken without delay.

Heathcote examined everything there was to see in the place, and walked three or four times from one end to another of the High Street, awakening the greatest curiosity in the bosoms of all the shopkeepers, and a flutter of futile hope and expectation behind the bonnets in the milliner's windows, where Miss Trimmin's niece took this novel apparition for the hero of her last romance. That a gentleman should see a face at a window, and walk up and down High Street for an hour for the chance of another glimpse of it, was not at all an out-of-the-way event for the readers of the 'Family Herald'—much more likely than that he should be waiting for Mr. Mountford. When, however, the master of Mount appeared at last, he bore all the outward signs of a prolonged combat. His hair was rubbed up off his forehead, so that his hat rested upon the ends of it, not upon his head. His eyes were agitated and rolling. Mr. Loseby, a little stout old gentleman, with a large watchchain and seals, came out after him with similar signs of commotion. The family lawyer was red and breathless, while his companion was choked and pale. They came out together with that air of formal politeness which follows a quarrel, to the door.

'Heathcote,' Mr. Mountford called, holding up his hand; 'this is Mr. Loseby, whose name must be known to you as the man of business of my family for several generations. We have always had the utmost confidence in them, as they have always done their best for us.'

‘After such an introduction,’ said Mr. Loseby, ‘I ought to make a bow and hope for the continuance of custom and favour, which my best efforts will be exerted to deserve.’

And then there was a forced laugh, in which some of the resentment of the two elder men fortunately blew off. They stood together in a circle at the door of the Queen Anne Mansion. Mr. Loseby only wore no hat. He was bald and round and shining all over, a man to whom genial good-humour was evidently more natural than the air of heat and irritation which was upon him now.

‘I hope we are to see something of Mr. Heathcote Mountford in the county after this. I hope you mean to make acquaintance with your neighbours, and feel yourself at home. The name of Mountford is a passport here.’ (‘Though I don’t know why it should be — obstinate asses! pig-headed fools!’ the puffing little lawyer said to himself.)

‘I am here on false pretences,’ Heathcote said. ‘I fear I have been taking in my cousin and his family and all their excellent friends. I may as well tell it at last. My real object in coming was rather to sever myself from the county than to draw the bond tighter——’

‘What do you mean?’ said Mr. Mountford, abruptly.

‘Forgive me for saying nothing about it before. This is a good opportunity now, when we have Mr. Loseby’s assistance. I came with the express intention of making a proposal to you, St. John, about the entail.’

Mr. Loseby looked first at the speaker and then at his client, forming his lips into a round, as if he would have said, ‘Whew-w!’ This was something altogether new.

Mr. Mountford took no notice of his look; he

said, still more abruptly than before, 'What about the entail?'

'Pardon me if I say it,' said Heathcote. 'Mount is quite new to me; it does not attract me' (what a fib that was, he felt in his heart). 'I shall never marry. I have suffered the time for forming new connections to pass, and my brother has indifferent health and no liking for country life. On the other hand, it is natural that my cousin should prefer to be succeeded by his own family. What I have to say is that I am very willing, if you like it, to join with you in breaking the entail.'

'In breaking the entail!' Mr. Loseby's mouth grew rounder and rounder; he seemed to be forming one whistle after another, which came to nothing. But he did not take time to express his own surprise or his own opinion, so much was he occupied in watching the effect of this announcement upon Mr. Mountford. The latter was dumbfounded; he stood and stared at the speaker with blank dismay and consternation. But it did not apparently produce any livelier or happier impression upon his mind. He was not eager to snatch at the opportunity of putting his own child in his place.

'You must be cracked,' he said; 'do you know how long the Mountfords have been at Mount?—the oldest house in the county, and, if not the richest or the largest, in some ways by far the most interesting. Heathcote, there must be something under this. If you are pressed for money, if there is anything you want to do, I dare say Loseby will manage it for you.'

'I will do anything that is in reason,' Mr. Loseby said, not without a little emphasis which brought a tinge of red on his client's countenance. They could not yet give up their duel with each other, however important the other communication might be.

‘Heathcote Mountford will not ask you to do anything out of reason,’ cried the other; ‘and in case he should exceed that limit, here am I ready to be his security. No, we must not hear anything more about breaking the entail.’

‘I am afraid you must consent to hear something more,’ said Heathcote, half pleased, half angry; ‘it is not a sudden fancy. I have considered it thoroughly; there are numberless advantages, and, so far as I can see, nothing of substantial weight to be brought forward on the other side.’

‘Oh, come, this is too much!’ cried the lawyer, moved to professional interest; ‘nothing on the other side! But this is not a place to discuss so serious a subject. Step into my office, and let us have it out.’

‘I have had enough of your office for one day,’ said Mr. Mountford (at which the lawyer barely restrained a chuckle); ‘I have had quite enough of your office, I’ll go and see about the horses. If there is anything wrong, Heathcote, have it out, as he says, with Loseby. He’ll make it all right for you. He may not always be satisfactory to deal with for those who prefer to judge for themselves sometimes; but if it is anything you want, he’ll give you trustworthy advice.’

‘Thank you for your good word, squire,’ said the lawyer, laughing and putting his hand to his forehead with the duck of a country bumpkin. ‘Now take a seat,’ he added, as he led the stranger into a trim wainscoted room with cupboards hid behind half the panels, and the secrets of half the families of the county in them, ‘and let us talk this over. I cannot understand why Mountford does not jump at it (yes, I do; I *can* understand, now), but why you should wish to do it! Pardon me, if I say on your side it is mere madness. What good can it do you? If you want money, as your cousin says, I

can get you as much money as you like—at least,’ he said, pausing to survey him with dubious looks, as if with a momentary apprehension that his new acquaintance might turn out a sporting man in difficulties or something of that disreputable kind, ‘almost as much as you like.’

‘I do want money,’ Heathcote said, ‘but I do not want it unless I give a fair equivalent. The entail is of no advantage to me. I live in London. I do not want to keep up the faded glories of a place in the country.’

‘Faded glories! We thought, on the contrary, everything was as fine as in the Queen’s palace, and all new,’ cried Mr. Loseby, with his favourite restrained whistle of comic surprise.

‘I have a place of my own,’ said Heathcote, ‘a poor one, I allow, but enough for my requirements. I am not a marrying man, and very likely, God knows, to be the last of my family; what do I want with an entailed estate?’

‘But that is so easily remedied,’ said the lawyer. ‘Marry—marry, my dear sir! and you will no longer be the last of your family, and will very soon learn to appreciate an entailed estate. By ——!’ cried Mr. Loseby, rubbing his hands. He would not say ‘By Jove!’ or even ‘By George!’ or anything of the sort, which would have been unbecoming his years and dignity; but when things were too many for him, he swore ‘By ——!’ and was refreshed. ‘I could tell you a thing to do,’ cried the lawyer, with a chuckle, ‘that would save the family from a great deal of trouble. What do you think that obstinate—I beg your pardon, Mr. Heathcote, he and I are old friends, we say what we please to each other?—what do you suppose he has been doing here?—trying to force me, against all the teachings of reason, to alter his will—to cut off that fine girl, that delightful creature, Anne.’

‘Mr. Loseby, I don’t suppose this is a thing which I am intended to know.’

‘You will know, sooner or later, if he carries it out,’ cried the lawyer; but you are right, I have no business to betray my client’s affairs. But, look here now,’ he said, bending across the table, leaning on both his elbows to look insinuatingly, coaxingly in Heathcote’s face, ‘look here now! I never saw you before, Mr. Heathcote, but your name is as familiar to me as my a, b, c, and I am a very old family friend, as I may say, as well as their man of business. Look here now. You are a very personable man, and not a bit too old for her, and a most suitable match in every way. Why shouldn’t you make up to Anne? Hear me out, and don’t flare up. Bless you, I am not a stranger, nor a mere impudent country attorney, as perhaps you are thinking. I knew them all before they were born. Anne is perhaps a little serious, you will think, a little high-faluting. But nobody knows till they *do* know her what a fine creature she is. Anne Mountford is a wife for a king. And here she’s got entangled with some fellow whom nobody knows, and Mountford of course refuses his consent. But she is not the girl to be bullied or treated with severity. Why couldn’t you go in now and try for Anne? You are not to be supposed to know anything about it; it would all be innocence in you; and who knows that she mightn’t be glad of the chance of slipping out of the other, though she won’t give in to threats. Won’t you think of it? Won’t you think of it? I don’t know the man, if he were a prince, that might not be proud of Anne.’

All this Heathcote listened to with very strange sensations. He was angry, amused, touched by the enthusiasm of the little round shining man, who thus entreated him, with every kind of eloquence he was capable of, his eyes and hands and his whole frame

twisting into gestures of persuasion. Heathcote was disposed to laugh, but he was still more disposed to resent this familiar employment of his cousin's name.

‘Are you aware that I have no right to be brought into the family secrets, to have their affairs thus revealed to me?’ he said. ‘Stop—nor to hear the name of a young lady for whom I have so much respect treated so. Allowing that I need not resent it as a liberty, since you are an older friend than I am, still you must see that between you and me, strangers to each other——’

‘Yes, yes, I see,’ said Mr. Loseby, ‘you are quite right. I see. I thought perhaps exceptional circumstances might warrant—but never mind. I am wrong; I see it. Well, then, about this entail business. Don’t you see this is why our friend does not jump at it? Little Rose could never be Mountford of Mount. Anne would make a noble squire, but it is out of the question for her sister. Keep to your entail, Mr. Heathcote, and if I can be of use to you, I will do my best. If it’s a money difficulty we’ll tide it over for you. Let me know all the circumstances, and I will do my best.’

‘I cannot give up my project all at once,’ Heathcote said, hesitating.

‘I would if I were you. It would harm yourself and do good to nobody. I certainly would if I were you,’ said the lawyer, getting up and accompanying him to the door.

‘I must exercise my own judgment on that point, Mr. Loseby.’

‘Certainly, certainly, certainly, Mr. Heathcote Mountford! You will all exercise your judgment, you will all do what seems good in your own eyes. I know what the Mountfords are from generation to generation. If it had not been that St. John Mountford had the luck to take a fancy to a rich woman

for his first wife, what would the place have been by this time? But that is a chance that doesn't happen once in a century. And now, when here is another—the finest chance! with openings for such a settlement! But never mind; never mind; of course you will all take your own way.'

'I hope you have brought him to reason, Loseby,' said Mr. Mountford, from the back of his cob, as they emerged again into the street.

'All arrangements about property which are against nature are against reason,' said the little lawyer, sententiously. 'Good afternoon, gentlemen. When you go in for these fancy arrangements, it is some sort of a poetical personage you want, and not a lawyer. I wish you a pleasant ride.'

'He is a character,' said Mr. Mountford, with a short laugh, as they rode away. But that laugh was the only sound of the lighter sort that broke the gravity of their silent companionship, as their horses' hoofs clattered over the stones of the little town, and came out upon the long silence of the country road now falling rapidly into twilight. 'We are a little late,' Mr. Mountford said, half-an-hour after. As for Heathcote, he did not feel, any more than his kinsman, in a humour for talk. What he had heard, though he had protested against hearing it, dwelt in his mind, and the somewhat morose gravity of the other infected him in spite of himself. What had St. John Mountford, who was in reality a commonplace, good enough sort of man, been doing to warrant so gloomy an aspect? Had he been turning the fortunes of the family upside down and spoiling the life of the daughter he loved best? or was it a mere exhibition of sulkiness consequent upon the quarrel with the lawyer and the opposition he had encountered? Heathcote had known nothing about these Mountfords a week ago, and now how closely he felt himself knitted up in

their affairs, whether he continued to be formally connected with them or not! As he rode along in silence by his kinsman's side, he could not help thinking of the catastrophe which might be coming; that 'fine creature' Anne—the little old bald shining lawyer had grown eloquent when he spoke of her. And though she seemed a little severe to Heathcote, he could not but acknowledge to himself that she had always interested him. Rose? oh, Rose was a pretty little thing, a child, a nobody; it did not matter very much what happened to her; but if it should happen that Anne's life was being changed, the brightness taken out of it, and all those advantages which seem so natural and becoming transferred from her to the profit of Rose? Heathcote felt that this would be a wrong to move heaven and earth; but it was not a subject in which he, a stranger, had any right to interfere. As he looked at the dark muffled figure of her father by his side against the faint crimson which still lingered in the west, he could scarcely help chafing at the thought that, though he was their nearest relation, he was still a stranger, and must not, dared not say a word. And what kind of fellow, he said to himself, in natural indignation, could it be who was wilfully leading Anne into the wilderness, accepting her sacrifice of that which was the very foundation of her life? Perhaps had he himself been the man who loved Anne he would have seen things in a different light; but from his present point of view his mind was full of angry wrath and contempt for the unknown who could let a girl inexperienced in the world give up so much for him. He was a nobody, they said. He must be a poor sort of creature, Heathcote, on these very insufficient grounds, decided in his heart.

It was a beautiful clear October night, with frost in the air, the stars shining every minute more and

more brightly, the crimson disappearing, even the last golden afterglow fading into palest yellow in the west, and all the great vault of sky darkening to perfect night. The horses' hoofs beat upon the long, safe, well-kept road, bordered by long monotonous walls and clouds of trees, from which darkness had stolen their colour—a perfectly safe, tranquil country road, with a peaceful house at the end, already lighting all its windows, preparing its table for the wayfarers. Yet there was something of the gloom of a tragedy in the dark figure wrapped in silence, pondering one could not tell what plans of mischief, and wrathful gloomy intentions, which rode by Heathcote's side, without a word, along all those miles of darkling way.

CHAPTER XVI.

GOOD ADVICE.

THE dinner to which the family sat down after this ride somewhat alarmed the stranger-relative who so suddenly found himself mixed up in their affairs. He thought it must necessarily be a constrained and uncomfortable meal. But this did not turn out to be the case. Anne knew nothing at all about what her father had been doing, and from Rose's light nature the half comprehended scene at luncheon, when her mother had wept and her father's face had been like a thundercloud, had already faded away. These two unconscious members of the party kept the tide of affairs in flow. They talked as usual—Anne even more than usual, as one who is unaware of the critical point at which, to the knowledge of all around, he or she is standing, so often does. She gave even a little more information than was called for about her visit to the Woodheads, being in her own mind half

ashamed of her cowardice in staying away after the scene of the morning. On the whole she was glad, she persuaded herself, of the scene of the morning. It had placed her position beyond doubt. There had seemed no occasion to make any statement to her father as to the correspondence which he had not forbidden or indeed referred to. He had bidden her give up her lover, and she had refused; but he had said nothing about the lover's letters, though these followed as a matter of course. And now it was well that he should know the exact position of affairs. She had been greatly agitated at the moment, but soon composed herself. And in her desire to show that she was satisfied, not grieved by what had happened, Anne was more than usually cheerful and communicative in her talk.

'Fanny is very happy about her brother who is coming home from India. He is to be here only six weeks; but he does not grudge the long journey: and they are all so happy.'

'He is a fool for his pains,' growled Mr. Mountford from the head of the table. 'I don't know what our young men are coming to. What right has he to such a luxury? It will cost him a hundred pounds at the least. Six weeks—he has not been gone as many years.'

'Four years—that is a long time when people are fond of each other,' said Anne, with a scarcely perceptible smile. Every individual at table instantly thought of the absent lover.

'She is thinking that I will be dead and gone in four years, and she will be free,' the angry father said to himself, with a vindictive sense that he was justified in the punishment he meant to inflict upon her. But Anne, indeed, was thinking of nothing of the kind, only with a visionary regret that in her own family there was no one to come eager over sea and land to be longed and prayed for with Fanny Wood-

head's anxious sisterly motherly passion. This was far, very far from the imagination of the others as a motive likely to produce such a sigh.

'A brother from India is always anxiously looked for,' said Mrs. Mountford, stepping in with that half-compunctious readiness to succour Anne which the knowledge of this day's proceedings had produced in her. She did not, in fact, know what these proceedings had been, and they were in no way her fault. But still she felt a compunction. 'They always bring such quantities of things with them,' she added. 'An Indian box is the most delightful thing to open. I had a brother in India, too——'

'I wish we had,' said Rose, with a pout. Heathcote had been preoccupied: he had not been so 'attentive' as usual: and she wished for a brother instantly, 'just to spite him,' she said to herself.

'Fanny is not thinking of the presents; but Rose, consider you are interested in it, too—that is another man for your dance.'

Rose clapped her hands. 'We are looking up,' she said. 'Twenty men from Sandhurst, and six from Meadowlands, and Lady Prayrey Poule's husband, and Fred Woodhead and Willie Ashley—for of course Willie is coming——'

'A dance at this time of the year is folly,' said Mr. Mountford; 'even in summer it is bad enough; but the only time of the year for entertainments in the country is when you have warm weather and short nights.'

'It was because of cousin Heathcote, papa. It is not often we have a man, a real relation, staying at Mount.'

'Heathcote! oh, so it is for your sake, Heathcote? I did not know that dancing was an attribute of reasonable beings after thirty,' Mr. Mountford said.

Then it was Anne who came to Heathcote's aid. 'You are not afraid of seeming frivolous?' she said,

giving him the kindest look he had yet seen in her eyes; and his heart was touched by it: he had not known that Anne's eyes had been so fine—'and it will please everybody. The county requires to be stirred up now and then. We like to have something to talk about, to say, "Are you going to the So-and-so's on the 25th?"'

'An admirable reason certainly for trouble and expense. If you were electioneering, it might be reasonable; but I presume your woman's rights are not so advanced yet as that. Miss Anne Mountford can't stand for the county!'

'I don't think she is likely to try, father,' said Anne, 'whatever might be the rights—or wrongs.'

'You must not think, Mr. Heathcote,' said Mrs. Mountford anxiously, 'that Anne has anything to say to women's rights. She is far too sensible. She has her own ways of thinking, but she is neither absurd nor strong-minded—'

'I hope you do not think me weak-minded, mamma,' Anne said, with a soft laugh.

And then little more was said. Mr. Mountford half rose and mumbled that grace after meat which leaves out all the more ethereal part of the repast as, we suppose, a kind of uncovenanted mercies for which no thanks are to be uttered; and after a while the ladies left the room. It was cold, but the whole frosty world outside lay enchanted under the whitening of the moon. The girls caught up fur cloaks and shawls as they went through the hall, and stepped outside involuntarily. The sky was intensely blue; the clouds piled high in snowy masses, the moon sailing serenely across the great expanse, veiling herself lightly here and there with a film of vapour which the wind had detached from the cloud-mountains. These filmy fragments were floating across the sky at extraordinary speed, and the wind was rising, whirling down showers of leaves. The

commotion among the trees, the sound of the wind, the rapid flight of the clouds, all chimed in with Anne's mood. She took hold of her sister's arm with gentle force. 'Stay a little, Rose—it is all quiet inside, and here there is so much going on: it is louder than one's thoughts,' Anne said.

'What do you mean by being louder than your thoughts? Your thoughts are not loud at all—not mine at least: and I don't like those dead leaves all blowing into my face; they feel like things touching you. I think I shall go in, Anne.'

'Not yet, dear. I like it: it occupies one in spite of one's self. The lawn will be all yellow to-morrow with scattered gold.'

'You mean with scattered leaves; of course it will,' said Rose. 'When the wind is high like this it brings the leaves down like anything. The lime trees will be stripped, and it is a pity, for they were pretty. Everything is pretty this year. Papa has been to Hunston,' she said, abruptly, looking Anne in the face; but it was very difficult even for Rose's keen little eyes to distinguish in the moonlight whether or not Anne *knew*.

Anne took very little notice of this bit of news. 'So Saymore told me. Did Mr. Heathcote see the church, I wonder? I hope some one told him how fine it was, and that there were some Mountford monuments.'

'Do you know what papa was doing in Hunston, Anne? He went to see Mr. Loseby. Mamma made quite a fuss when he went away. She would not tell me what it was. Perhaps she did not know herself. She often gets into quite a state about things she doesn't know. Can you tell me what papa could want with Mr. Loseby? you can see for yourself how cross he is now he has come back.'

'With Mr. Loseby? no, I cannot tell you, Rose.' Anne heard the news with a little thrill of excite-

ment. It was rarely that Mr. Mountford went so far; very rarely that he did anything which, through his wife, or Saymore, or Rose herself, did not find its way to the knowledge of the entire household. Anne connected the incident of the morning with this recent expedition, and her heart beat faster in her breast. Well: she was prepared; she had counted the cost. If she was to be disinherited, that could be borne—but not to be untrue.

‘That means you will not tell me, Anne. I wonder why I should always be the last to know. For all anyone can tell, it may just be of as much consequence to me as to you, if he went to tamper with his will, as mamma said. What do you call tampering with a will? I don’t see,’ cried Rose, indignantly, ‘why I should always be supposed too young to know. Most likely it is of just as much consequence to me as to you.’

‘Rose,’ cried her mother, from the window, ‘come in—come in at once! How can you keep that child out in the cold, Anne, when you know what a delicate throat she has?’ Then Mrs. Mountford gave an audible shiver and shut down the window hastily; for it was very cold.

‘I have nothing to tell you, dear,’ Anne said gently. ‘But you are quite right; if there is any change made, it will be quite as important to you as to me: only you must not ask me about it, for my father does not take me into his confidence, and I don’t know.’

‘You don’t want to tell me!’ said the girl; but this time Mrs. Mountford knocked loudly on the window, and Rose was not sufficiently emancipated to neglect the second summons. Anne walked with her sister to the door, but then came back again to the sheltered walk under the windows. It was a melancholy hour when one was alone. The yellow leaves came down in showers flying on the wind.

The clouds pursued each other over the sky. The great masses of vapours behind the wind began to invade the frosty blue; yet still the moon held on serenely, though her light was more and more interrupted by sudden blanks of shadow. Anne had no inclination to go into the quiet of the drawing-room, the needlework, and Mrs. Mountford's little lectures, and perhaps the half-heard chattering with which Rose amused and held possession of her cousin. To her, whose happier life was hidden in the distance, it was more congenial to stay out here, among the flying winds and falling leaves. If it was so that Fortune was forsaking her; if her father had carried out his threat, and she was now penniless, with nothing but herself to take to Cosmo, what change would this make in her future life? Would *he* mind? What would he say? Anne had no personal experience at all, though she was so serious and so deeply learned in the troubles at least of village life. As she asked herself these questions, a smile crept about her lips in spite of her. She did not mean to smile. She meant to inquire very gravely: would he mind? what would he say? but the smile came without her knowledge. What could he say but one thing? If it had been another man, there might have been doubts and hesitations—but Cosmo! The smile stole to the corners of her mouth—a melting softness came into her heart. How little need was there to question! Did not she *know*?

Her thoughts were so full of this that she did not hear another foot on the gravel, and when Heathcote spoke she awakened with a start, and came down out of that lofty hermitage of her thoughts with little satisfaction; but when he said something of the beauty of the night and the fascination of all those voices of the wind and woods, Anne, whether willingly or not, felt herself com-

pelled to be civil. She came down from her abstraction, admitting, politely, that the night was fine. 'But,' she said, 'it is very cold, and the wind is rising every moment; I was thinking of going in.'

'I wonder if you would wait for a few minutes, Miss Mountford, and hear something I have to say.'

'Certainly,' Anne said; but she was surprised; and now that it was no longer her own will which kept her here, the wind all at once became very boisterous, and the 'silver lights and darks' dreary. 'Do you know we have a ghost belonging to us?' she said. 'She haunts that lime avenue. We ought to see her to-night.'

'We have so little time for ghosts,' said Heathcote, almost fretfully; and then he added, 'Miss Mountford, I came to Mount on a special mission. Will you let me tell you what it was? I came to offer your father my co-operation in breaking the entail.'

'Breaking the entail!' the idea was so surprising that all who heard it received it with the same exclamation. As for Anne, she did more: she cast one rapid involuntary glance around her upon the house with all its lights, the familiar garden, the waving clouds of trees. In her heart she felt as if a sharp arrow of possible delight, despair, she knew not which, struck her keenly to the core. It was only for a moment. Then she drew a long breath and said, 'You bewilder me altogether; break the entail—why should you? I cannot comprehend it. Pardon me, it is as if the Prince of Wales said he would not have the crown. Mount is England to us Mountfords. I cannot understand what you mean.'

Heathcote thought he understood very well what *she* meant. He understood her look. Everything round was dear to her. Her first thought had been—Mount! to be ours still, ours always! But what

did *ours* mean? Did she think of herself as heiress and mistress, or of—someone else? This pricked him at the heart, as she had been pricked by a different sentiment, by the thought that she had no longer the first interest in this piece of news; but there was no reason whatever for keen feeling in his case. What did it matter to him who had it? He did not want it. He cleared his throat to get rid of that involuntary impatience and annoyance. ‘It is not very difficult to understand,’ he said. ‘Mount is not to me what it is to you; I have only been here once before. My interests are elsewhere.’

Anne bowed gravely. They did not know each other well enough to permit of more confidential disclosures. She did not feel sufficient interest to ask, he thought; and she had no right to pry into his private concerns, Anne said to herself. Then there was a pause: which she broke quite unexpectedly with one of those impulses which were so unlike Anne’s external aspect, and yet so entirely in harmony with herself.

‘This makes my heart beat,’ she said, ‘the idea that Mount might be altogether ours—our home in the future as well as in the past; but at the same time, forgive me, it gives me a little pain to think that there is a Mountford, and he the heir, who thinks so little of Mount. It seems a slight to the place. I grudge that you should give it up, though it is delightful to think that we may have it; which is absurd, of course—like so many other things.’

‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘there is a great deal of the same sort of feeling in my own mind. I can’t care for Mount, can I? I have not seen it for fifteen years; I was a boy then; now I am middle-aged, and don’t care much for anything. But yet I too grudge that I should care for it so little; that I

should be so willing to part with it. The feeling is absurd, as you say. If you could have it, Miss Mountford, I should surmount that feeling easily: I should rejoice in the substitution——’

‘And why should not I have it?’ cried Anne quickly, turning upon him. Then she paused and laughed, though with constraint, and begged his pardon. ‘I don’t quite know what you mean,’ she said, ‘or what you know.’

‘Miss Mountford, having said so much to you, may I say a little more? I am one of your nearest relatives, and I am a great deal older than you are. There is some question which divides you from your father. I do not ask nor pretend to divine what it is. You are not agreed—and for this reason he thinks little of my proposal, and does not care to secure the reversion of his own property, the house which, in other circumstances, he would have desired to leave in your possession. I think, so far as I have gone, this is the state of the case?’

‘Well!’ She neither contradicted him nor consented to what he had said, but stood in the fitful moonlight, blown about by the wind, holding her cloak closely round her, and looking at him between the light and gloom.

‘Pardon me,’ he said, ‘I have no right whatever to interfere: but—if you could bend your will to his—if you could humour him as long as his life lasts: your father is becoming an old man. Miss Mountford, you would not need perhaps to make this sacrifice for very long.’

She clasped her hands with impatient alarm, stopping him abruptly—‘Is my father ill? Is there anything you know of that we do not know?’

‘Nothing whatever. I only know his age, no more. Could you not yield to him, subdue your will to his? You are young, and you have plenty of time to wait. Believe me, the happiness that will

not bear to be waited for is scarcely worth having. I have no right to say a word—I do not understand the circumstances—actually I *know* nothing about them. But if you could yield to him, humour him for a time——’

‘Pretend to obey him while he lived,’ Anne said, in a low voice, ‘in order that I may be able to cheat him when he is gone: that is a strange thing to recommend to me.’

‘There is no question of cheating him. What I mean is, that if you would submit to him; give him the pleasure of feeling himself obeyed in the end of his life——’

‘I owe my father obedience at all times; but there are surely distinctions. Will you tell me why you say this to me?’

‘I cannot tell you why: only that there is something going on which will tell against you: sincerely, I do not know what it is. I do not want to counsel you to anything false, and I scarcely know what I am advising you to do. It is only, Miss Mountford, while you can—if you can—to submit to him: or even, if no better can be, *seem* to submit to him. Submit to him while he lives. This may be a caprice on his part – no more: but at the same time it may affect your whole life.’

Anne stood for a moment irresolute, not knowing what to say. The night favoured her and the dark. She could speak with less embarrassment than if the daylight had been betraying her every look and change of aspect. ‘Mr. Heathcote, I thank you for taking so much interest in me,’ she said.

‘I take the greatest interest in you, Miss Mountford; but in the meantime I would say the same to anyone so young. Things are going on which will injure you for your life. If you can by your submission avert these ills, and make him happier—even for a time?’

‘In short,’ she said again, ‘pretend to give up until he is no longer here to see whether I follow my own inclinations or his? It may be wise advice, Mr. Heathcote; but is it advice which you would like your—anyone you cared for—to take?’

‘I should not like anyone I cared for,’ he said hesitating—‘Pardon me, I cannot help offending you—to be in opposition to her family on such a point.’

The colour rushed to Anne’s face, and anger to her heart: but as the one was invisible, so she restrained the other. She put restraint in every way on herself.

‘That may be so, that may be so! you cannot tell unless you know everything,’ she said. Then, after a pause, ‘But whether it was right or wrong, it is done now, and I cannot alter it. It is not a matter upon which another can decide for you. Obedience at my age cannot be absolute. When you have to make the one choice of your life, can your father do it, or anyone but yourself? Did you think so when you were like me?’ she said, with an appeal full of earnestness which was almost impassioned. This appeal took Heathcote entirely by surprise, and changed all the current of his thoughts.

‘I was never like you,’ he said, hastily—‘like you! I never could compare myself—I never could pretend—I thought I loved half-a-dozen women. Did I ever make the one choice of my life? No, no! A wandering man afloat upon the world can never be like—such as you: there is too great a difference. We cannot compare things so unlike——’

‘But I thought’—she said, then stopped: for his story which she had heard bore a very different meaning. And what right had she to advert to it? ‘I don’t know if you speak in— in respect—or in contempt?’

‘In contempt—could that be? Here is the state of the case as concerns yourself—leaving the general question. My offer to break the entail has no attractions for your father, because he thinks he cannot secure Mount to you. It is doing something against his own heart, against all he wishes, to punish you. Don’t you know, Miss Mountford—but most likely you never felt it—that

to be wroth with those we love
Doth work like madness in the brain?’

‘Love?—that would be great love, passionate love—we have not anything of the kind in our house,’ said Anne, in a low tone of emotion. ‘If there was that, do you think I would go against it, even for—’

‘Here she stopped with a thrill in her voice. ‘I think you must be mistaken a little, Mr. Heathcote. But I do not see how I can change. Papa asked of me—not the lesser things in which I could have obeyed him, but the one great thing in which I could not. Were I to take your advice, I do not know what I could do.’

Then they walked in silence round the side of the house, under the long line of the drawing-room windows, from which indeed the interview had been watched with much astonishment. Rose had never doubted that the heir of the house was on her side. It seemed no better than a desertion that he should walk and talk with Anne in this way. It filled her with amazement. And in such a cold night too! ‘Hush, child!’ her mother was saying; ‘he has been with papa to Hunston, he has heard all the business arrangements talked over. No doubt he is having a little conversation with Anne, for her good.’

‘What are the business arrangements? What is going to happen?’ Is he trying to make her give up Mr. Douglass?’ said Rose: but her mother could

not or would not give her any information. By-and-by Heathcote came in alone. Anne was too much disturbed by this strange interview to appear when it was over in the tranquil circle of the family. She went upstairs to take off her wraps, to subdue the commotion in her mind and the light in her eyes, and tame herself down to the every-day level. Her mind was somewhat confused, more confused than it had yet been as to her duty. Cosmo somehow had seemed to be gently pushed out of the first place by this stranger who never named him, who knew nothing of him, and who certainly ignored the fact that, without Cosmo, Anne no longer lived or breathed. She was angry that he should be so ignorant, yet too shy and proud to mention her lover or refer to him save by implication. She would have been willing to give up corresponding with him, to make any immediate sacrifice to her father's prejudice against him—had that been ever asked of her. But to give up 'the one choice of her life,' as she had said, would have been impossible. Her mind was affected strongly, but not with alarm, by the intelligence that something was being done mysteriously in the dark against her, that the threat under which she had been living was now being carried out. But this did not move her to submit as Heathcote had urged—rather it stimulated her to resist.

Had Cosmo but been at hand! But if he had been at hand, how could he have ventured to give the advice which Heathcote gave? He could not have asked her to yield, to dissemble, to please the old man while his life lasted, to pretend to give himself up. Nothing of this could he have suggested or she listened to. And yet it was what Cosmo would have liked to advise; but to this state of Cosmo's mind Anne had no clue.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ABSOLUTE AND THE COMPARATIVE.

THIS secret incident in the family history left a great deal of agitation in the house. Mrs. Mountford had not been informed in any detail what her husband's mission to Hunston was. She knew that he had gone to 'tamper with his will,' as she said, but what were the exact changes he meant to make in that will she did not know. They were certainly to the advantage of Rose and to the detriment of Anne: so much she was aware of, but scarcely anything more. And she herself was frightened and excited, afraid of all the odium to which she would infallibly be exposed if the positions of the sisters were changed, and more or less affected by a shrinking from palpable injustice; but yet very much excited about Rose's possible good fortune, and not feeling it possible to banish hopes and imaginations on this point out of her mind. If Rose was put in the first place it would not be just—not exactly just, she said to herself, with involuntary softening of the expression. Rose's mother (though she would be blamed) knew that of herself she never would have done anything to deprive Anne of her birthright. But still, if papa thought Anne had behaved badly, and that Rose deserved more at his hands, he was far better—no doubt *far better*, able to judge than she was; and who could say a word against his decision? But it was very irritating, very wearing, not to know. She tried a great many ways of finding out, but she did not succeed. Mr. Mountford was on his guard, and kept his own counsel. He told her of Heathcote's proposal, but he did not tell her what he himself meant to do. And how it was that her husband was so indifferent to Heathcote's proposal Mrs. Mountford

could not understand. She herself, though not a Mountford born, felt her heart beat at the suggestion. 'Of course you will jump at it?' she said.

'I do not feel in the least disposed to jump at it. If there had been a boy, it might have been different.' Mrs. Mountford always felt that in this there was an inferred censure upon herself—how unjust a censure it is unnecessary to say: of course she would have had a boy if she could—of that there could be no question.

'A boy is not everything,' she said. 'It would be just the same thing if Anne's husband took the name.

'Don't speak to me of Anne's husband,' he cried, almost with passion. 'I forbid you to say a word to me of Anne's affairs.'

'St. John! what can you mean? It would be barbarous of me, it would be unchristian,' cried the much-exercised mother, trying hard to do her duty, 'not to speak of Anne's affairs. Probably the man you object to will never be her husband; probably——'

'That is enough, Letitia. I want to hear nothing more upon the subject. Talk of anything else you like, but I will have nothing said about Anne.'

'Then you are doing wrong,' she cried, with a little real indignation. After this her tone changed in a moment: something like bitterness stole into it. 'It shows how much more you are thinking of Anne than of anyone else. You are rejecting Mount because you don't choose that she should be the heir. You forget you have got another child.'

'Forget I have got another child! It is the first subject of my thoughts.'

'Ah, yes, perhaps so far as the money is concerned. Of course if Anne does not have it, there is nobody but Rose who could have any right to it. But you don't think your youngest daughter good

enough to have anything to do with Mount. I see very well how it is, though you don't choose to explain.'

'If that is how you prefer to look at it,' he said; but at this moment a budget of papers arrived from Hunston by a special messenger, and Mrs. Mountford withdrew perforce. She was in a very irritable condition, as all the house knew, ready to find fault with everything. Perhaps it was rather an advantage to her to have a grievance, and to be able to reproach her husband with preferring in his heart the elder to the younger, even when he was preferring the younger to the elder in this new will. 'There will never be any question of *my* child's husband taking the name, that is very clear,' she said to herself, with much vehemence, nursing her wrath to keep it warm, and thus escaping from the question of injustice to Anne. And again it occurred to her, but with more force than before, that to announce to her husband that Rose was going to marry Heathcote Mountford would be a delightful triumph. She would thus be Mrs. Mountford of Mount in spite of him, and the victory would be sweet. But even this did not seem to progress as it appeared to do at first. Heathcote, too, seemed to be becoming interested in Anne: as if that could advantage him! when it was clear that Anne was ready to lose everything, and was risking everything, every day, for that other! Altogether Mrs. Mountford's position was not a comfortable one. To know so much and yet to know so little was very hard to bear.

Her husband had a still harder life as being a free agent, and having the whole weight of the decision upon his shoulders. It was not to be supposed that he could free himself entirely from all sense of guilt towards the child whom in his heart he loved most. He had resolved to punish her, and he clung to his resolution with all the determination of a narrow mind. He had said that she should

never marry the man who was nobody, that if she held by him he would give her fortune to Rose. And she did hold by him, with an obstinacy equal to his own. Was it possible that he should bear this and give her reason to laugh at his words as mere sound and fury signifying nothing? No, whatever he might have to suffer for it, no! Perhaps, however, the great secret of Mr. Mountford's obstinate adherence to a determination which he could not but know to be unjust and cruel—and of many more of the cruelties and eccentricities that people perpetrate by their wills—lay in the fact that, after all, though he took so much trouble to make his will, he had not the slightest intention of dying. If a man does not die, a monstrous will is no more than an angry letter—a thing which wounds and vexes, perhaps, and certainly is intended to wound and vex, and which suffices to blow off a great deal of the steam of family quarrels; but which does no real harm to anybody, in that there is plenty of time to change it, and to make all right again some time or other. Another thing which assisted him in getting over his own doubts and disquietudes was the strenuous, almost violent, opposition of Mr. Loseby, who did not indeed refuse at last to carry out his wishes, but did so with so many protests and remonstrances that Mr. Mountford's spirit was roused, and he forgot the questionings of his own conscience in the determination to defend himself against those of this other man who had, he declared to himself, nothing whatever to do with it, and no right to interfere. Could not a man do what he would with his own? The money was his own, the land his own, and his children too were his own. Who else had anything to do with the arrangements he chose to make for them? It was of his grace and favour if he gave them his money at all. He was not bound to do so. It was all his: he was not responsible to any mortal;

it was a pretty piece of impudence that Loseby should venture to take so much upon him. This opposition of Loseby's did him all the good in the world. It set him right with himself. But still those packets of papers, always accompanied by a letter, were annoying to him. 'I send you the draft of the new codicil, but you must allow me to observe——' 'I return draft with the corrections you have made, but I must once more entreat you to pause and reconsider——' What did the old fellow mean? Did he think he had any right to speak—a country attorney, a mere man of business? To be sure he was an old friend—nobody said he was not an old friend; but the oldest friend in the world should know his own place, and should not presume too far. If Loseby thought that now, when matters had gone this length, *his* representations would have any effect, he was indeed making a mistake. Before pen had been put to paper Mr. Mountford might perhaps have reconsidered the matter; but now, and in apparent deference to *Loseby*! this was a complaisance which was impossible.

The whole house was agitated by these proceedings, though publicly not a word was said nor an allusion made to them. Anne even, absolutely disinterested as she was, and full of a fine, but alas! quite unreasonable contempt for fortune—the contempt of one who had no understanding of the want of it—felt it affect her in, as she thought, the most extraordinary and unworthy way. She was astonished at herself. After all, she reflected, with a sense of humiliation, how much power must those external circumstances have on the mind, when she, whose principles and sentiments were all so opposed to their influence, could be thus moved by the possible loss of a little land or a little money! It was pitiful: but she could not help it, and she felt herself humbled to the very dust. In the fulness of

her heart she wrote an account of all that was happening to Cosmo, reproaching herself, yet trying to account for her weakness. 'It cannot be the mere loss of the wealth that affects me,' Anne wrote. 'I cannot believe so badly of myself, and I hope—I hope—you will not think so badly of me. It must be (don't you think?) the pain of feeling that my father thinks so little of me as to put upon me this public mark of his displeasure. I say to myself, dear Cosmo, that this must be the cause of the very unquestionable pain I feel; and I hope you will think so too, and not that it is the actual money I care for. And, then, there is the humiliation of being put second—I who have always been first. I never thought there was so much in seniority, in all those little superiorities which I suppose we plume ourselves upon without knowing it. I can't bear the idea of being second, I suppose. And then there is the uncertainty, the sense of something that is going on, in which one is so closely concerned, but which one does not know, and the feeling that others are better informed, and that one is being talked of, and the question discussed how one will bear it. As if it mattered! but I acknowledge with humiliation that it does matter, that I care a great deal more than I ever thought I cared—that I am a much poorer creature than I believed I was. I scorn myself, but I hope my Cosmo will not scorn me. You know the world better, and the heart which is pettier than one likes to think. Perhaps it is women only that are the victims of these unworthy sentiments. I cannot think of you as being moved by them; perhaps what is said of us is true, and we are only "like moonlight unto sunlight, and like water unto wine." But these are far too pretty comparisons if I am right. However, heaven be praised, there is the happiness of feeling that, if I am but after all a mean and interested creature, there is you to fall back upon,

who are so different. O Cosmo mio, what would the world be now if I had not you to fall back upon (I like these words!), and lean against and feel myself doubled, or so much more than doubled, and propped up by you. I feel already a little better for getting this off my mind and telling you what I have found out in myself, and how ashamed I am by my discoveries. You have "larger, other eyes" than mine, and you will understand me, and excuse me, and put me right.'

Cosmo Douglas received this letter in his chambers, to which he had now gone back. He read it with a sort of consternation. First, the news it conveyed was terrible, making an end of all his hopes; and second, this most ill-timed and unnecessary self-accusation was more than his common sense could put up with. It was not that the glamour of love was wearing off, for he still loved Anne truly; but that anyone in her senses could write so about money was inconceivable to him. Could there be a more serious predicament? and yet here was she apologising to him for feeling it, making believe that he would not feel it. Is she a fool? he said to himself—he was exasperated, though he loved her. And in his reply he could not but in some degree betray this feeling.

'My dearest,' he said, 'I don't understand how you can blame yourself. The feelings you express are most natural. It is very serious, very painful—ininitely painful to me, that it is my love and the tie which binds us which has brought this upon you. What am I to say to my dear love? Give me up, throw me over? I will bear anything rather than that you should suffer; but I know your generous heart too well to imagine that you will do this. If you were "petty," as you call yourself (heaven forgive you for such blasphemy!) I could almost be tempted to advise you to have recourse to—what

shall I call it?—strategy—one of the fictions that are said to be all fair in love and war. I could do this myself, I am afraid, so little is there in me of the higher sentiment you give me credit for. Rather than that you should lose your birthright, if it were only my happiness that was concerned, I would take myself out of the way, I would give up the sweet intercourse which is life to me, and hope for better days to come. And if you should decide to do this, I will accept whatever you decide, my darling, with full trust in you that you will not forget me, that the sun may shine for me again. Will you do this, my Anne? Obey your father, and let me take my chance: it will be better that than to be the cause of so much suffering to you. But even in saying this I feel that I will wound your tender heart, your fine sense of honour: what can I say? Sacrifice me, my dearest, if you can steel your heart to the possibility of being unkind. I would be a poor wretch, indeed, unworthy the honour you have done me, if I could not trust you and bide my time.'

This letter was very carefully composed and with much thought. If Anne could but have been made a convert to the code that all is fair in love, what a relief it would have been; or if she could have divined the embarrassment that a portionless bride, however much he loved her, would be to Cosmo! But, on the other hand, there was no certainty that, even if the worst came to the worst, she would be a portionless bride; and the chances of alarming her, and bringing about a revulsion of feeling, were almost more dreadful than the chances of losing her fortune. It wanted very delicate steering to hit exactly the right passage between these dangers, and Cosmo was far from confident that he had hit it. A man with a practical mind and a real knowledge of the world has a great deal to go

through when he has to deal with the absolute in the person of a young inexperienced and high-flown girl, altogether ignorant of the world. And, as a matter of fact, the letter did not please Anne. It gave her that uneasy sense of coming in contact with new agencies, powers unknown, not to be judged by her previous canons, which is one of the first disenchantments of life. How to lie and yet not be guilty of lying was a new science to her. She did not understand that casuistry of love, which makes it a light offence to deceive. She understood the art of taking her own way, but that of giving up her own way, and yet resolving to have it all the same, was beyond her power. What they wanted her to do was to deceive her father, to wait—surely the most terrible of all meanness—till he should be dead and then break her promise to him. This was what Heathcote had advised, and now Cosmo—Cosmo himself replied to her when she threw herself upon him for support, in the same sense. A chill of disappointment, discouragement, came over her. If this was the best thing to be done, it seemed to Anne that her own folly was better than their wisdom. Had she been told that love and a stout heart and two against the world were better than lands or wealth, she would have felt herself strong enough for any heroism. But this dash of cold water in her face confounded her. What did they mean by telling her to obey her father? he had not asked for obedience. He had said, ‘If you do not give up this man, I will take your fortune from you,’ and she had proudly accepted the alternative. That was all; and was she to go back to him now, to tell him a lie, and with a mental reservation say, ‘I prefer my fortune; I have changed my mind; I will give him up?’ Anne knew that she could not have survived the utter scorn of herself which would have been her portion had she done this. Were it necessary to do

it, the proud girl would have waited till the other sacrifice was completed, till her father had fulfilled his threat. Cosmo's letter gave her a chill in the very warmth of her unbounded faith in him. She would not allow to herself that he did not understand her, that he had failed of what she expected from him. This was honour, no doubt, from his point of view; but she felt a chill sense of loneliness, a loss of that power of falling back upon an unfailing support which she had so fondly and proudly insisted on. She was subdued in her courage and pride and confidence. And yet this was not all that Anne had to go through.

It was Mr. Loseby who was the next operator upon her disturbed and awakening thoughts. One wintry afternoon when November had begun, he drove over to Mount in his little phaeton with a blue bag on the seat beside him. 'Don't say anything to your master yet, Saymore,' he said, when he got down, being familiar with all the servants, and the habits of the house, as if it had been his own. 'Do you think you could manage to get me a few words privately with Miss Anne?'

'If I might make bold to ask, sir,' said Saymore, 'is it true as there is something up about Miss Anne? Things is said and things is 'inted, and we're interested, and we don't know what to think. Is it along of *that* gentleman, Mr. Loseby? Master is set against the match, I know as much as that.'

'I dare say you're right,' said the lawyer. 'An old family servant like you, Saymore, sees many things that the rest of the world never guess at. Hold your tongue about it, old fellow, that's all I've got to say. And try whether you can bring me to speech of Miss Anne. Don't let anyone else know. You can manage it, I feel sure.'

'I'll try, sir,' Saymore said, and he went through the house on tiptoe from room to room, looking for

his young mistress, with the air of a conspirator in an opera, doing everything he could to betray himself. When he found her, he stole behind a large screen, and made mysterious gestures which everybody saw. 'What is it, Saymore?' asked Anne. Then Saymore pointed downstairs, with jerks over his shoulder, and much movement of his eyebrows. 'There's somebody, Miss Anne, as wants a word with you,' he said, with the deepest meaning. Anne's heart began to beat. Could it be Cosmo come boldly, in person, to comfort her? She was in the billiard-room with Rose and Heathcote. She put down the cue which she had been using with very little energy or interest, and followed the old man to the hall. 'Who is it, Saymore?' she asked tremulously. 'It's some one that's come for your good. I hope you'll listen to him, Miss Anne, I hope you'll listen to him.' Anne's heart was in her mouth. If he should have come so far to see her, to support her, to make up for the deficiency of his letter! She seemed to tread on air as she went down the long passages. And it was only Mr. Loseby after all!

The disappointment made her heart sink. She could scarcely speak to him. It was like falling down to earth from the skies. But Mr. Loseby did not notice this. He put his arm into hers as the rector did, with a fatherly familiarity, and drew her to the large window full of the greyness of the pale and misty November sky. 'I have something to say to you, my dear Miss Anne—something that is of consequence. My dear, do you know anything about the business that brings me here?'

'I know—that my father is making some alteration in his will, Mr. Loseby. I don't know any more—why should I?—I do not see why I should believe that it has anything to do with me.'

'Anne, my dear, I can't betray your father's secrets; but I am afraid it has something to do with

you. Now look here, my dear girl—why it is not so long since you used to sit on my knee! Tell me what this is, which has made you quarrel with papa——’

‘Mr. Loseby!—I—do not know that I have quarrelled with my father——’

‘Don’t be so stern, my dear child. Call him papa. After all he is your papa, Anne. Who was so fond of you when you were a tiny creature? I remember you a baby in his arms, poor man! when he lost his first wife, before he married again. Your mother died so young, and broke his life in two. That is terribly hard upon a man. Think of him in that light, my dear. He was wrapped up in you when you were a baby. Come! let me go to him, an old friend, your very oldest friend, and say you are ready to make it up.’

‘To make it up?—but it is not a quarrel— not anything like a quarrel.’

‘Yes, yes, it is—I know better. Only say that you will do nothing without his consent; that you will form no engagement; that you will give up corresponding and all that. You ought to, my dear; it is your duty. And when it will save you from what would inconvenience you all your life! What, Anne, you are not going to be offended with what I say, your oldest friend?’

‘Mr. Loseby, you do not understand,’ she said. She had attempted, in her impatience, to withdraw her arm from his. ‘He said “Give up”—I do not wish to conceal who it is—“give up Mr. Douglas, or I will take away your portion and give it to your sister.” What could I say? (Could I show so little faith in the choice I had made—so little—so little—regard for the gentleman I am going to marry, as to say, “I prefer my fortune?” I will not do it; it would be falsehood and baseness. This

is all the alternative I have ever had. It is like saying, "Your money or your life"——'

'In that case one gives the money, Anne, to save the life.'

'And so I have done,' she said, proudly. 'Dear Mr. Loseby, I don't want to vex you. I don't want to quarrel with anyone. Can I say, when it is not true—"I have changed my mind, I like the money best?" Don't you see that I could not do that? then what can I do?'

'You can give in, my dear, you can give in,' repeated the lawyer. 'No use for entering into particulars. So long as you authorise me to say you give in—that is all, I am sure, that is needful. Don't turn me off, Anne—give me the pleasure of reconciling you, my dear.'

Mr. Loseby had always given himself out as one of Anne's adorers. His eyes glistened with the moisture in them. He pressed her arm within his. 'Come, my dear! I never was a father myself, which I have always regretted; but I have known you all your life. Let me do you a good turn—let me put a stop to all this nonsense, and tell him you will make it up.'

Anne's heart had sunk very low; with one assault of this kind after another she was altogether discouraged. She did not seem to care what she said, or what interpretation was put upon her words. 'You may say what you please,' she said. 'I will make it up, if you please: but what does that mean, Mr. Loseby? I will give up writing, if he wishes it—but how can I give up the—gentleman I am engaged to? Do you think I want to quarrel? Oh, no, no—but what can I do? Give up!—I have no right. He has my promise and I have his. Can I sell that for money?' cried Anne, indignantly. 'I will do whatever papa pleases—except that.'

'You are making him do a dreadful injustice,

Anne. Come, what does this young fellow say? Does he not want to release you, to save you from suffering? does he hold you to your promise in the face of such a loss? An honourable young man would tell you: never mind me——'

Anne detached her arm with a little energy from his. 'Why should you torment me?' she cried. 'An honourable man?—is it honour, then, to prefer, as you said yourself, one's money to one's life?'

'My dear child, money is always there, it is always to be relied upon; it is a strong back, whatever happens—whereas this, that you call life——!' cried Mr. Loseby, spreading out his hands and lifting up his eyebrows; he had chosen the very image she had herself used when writing to her lover. Was this then what they all thought, that wealth was the best thing to fall back upon? She smiled, but it was a smile of pain.

'If I thought so, I should not care either for the life or the money,' she said.

Mr. Loseby held up his hands once more. He shook his shining little bald head, and took up his blue bag from the table. 'You are as obstinate, as pig-headed, the whole family of you—one worse than another,' he said.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTERTHOUGHTS.

THERE were two witnesses wanted for the will; one of these was Heathcote Mountford, the other the clerk whom Mr. Loseby had brought with him in his phaeton. He stood by himself, looking as like an indignant prophet whose message from heaven has been disregarded, as a fat little shining man of five feet four could look. It had been to make a last attempt upon the mind of Mr. Mountford, and also

to try what effect he could produce on the heart of Anne, that he had come himself, facing all the risks of an east wind, with perhaps snow to come. And there had been a long and stormy interview in the library before the clerk had been called in. 'She will give up the correspondence. She is as sweet as a girl can be,' said the old lawyer, fibbing manfully; 'one can see that it goes to her heart that you should think her disobedient. Mountford, you don't half know what a girl that is. But for the money she would come to you, she would put herself at your feet, she would give up everything. But she says, bless her! "Papa would think it was because of the money. Do you think I would do that for the money which I wouldn't do to please him?" That's Anne all over,' said her mendacious advocate. 'After you have accomplished this injustice and cut her off, that sweet creature will come to you some fine day and say, "Papa, I give him up. I give everything up that displeases you—I cannot go against my duty."'

There was a slight attempt at imitation of Anne's voice in Mr. Loseby's tone; he tried a higher key when he made those imaginary speeches on her behalf: but his eyes were glistening all the time: he did not intend to be humorous. And neither was Mr. Mountford a man who saw a joke. He took it grimly without any softening.

'When she does that, Loseby, if I see reason to believe that she means it, I'll make another will.'

'You speak at your ease of making another will—are you sure you will have it in your power? When a man makes an unjust will, I verily believe every word is a nail in his coffin. It is very seldom,' said Mr. Loseby, with emphasis, carried away by his feelings, 'that they live to repent.'

Mr. Mountford paled in spite of himself. He

looked up sharply at his mentor, then laughed a short uneasy laugh. 'There's nothing like a partisan,' he said; 'I call that brutal—if it were not so silly, Loseby—unworthy a man of your sense.'

'By ——!' the lawyer cried to relieve himself, 'I don't see the silliness; when you've taken a wrong step that may plunge other people into misery, I cannot see how you can have any confidence, even in the protection of God; and you are not in your first youth any more than myself. The thought of dying can't be put aside at your age or at my age, Mountford, as if we were boys of twenty. We have got to think of it, whether we will or not.'

This address made Mr. Mountford furious. He felt no occasion at all in himself to think of it; it was a brutal argument, and quite beyond all legitimate discussion; but nevertheless it was not pleasant. He did not like the suggestion. 'Perhaps you'll call that clerk of yours, and let us finish the business, before we get into fancy and poetry. I never knew you were so imaginative,' he said, with a sneer; but his lips were bluish, notwithstanding this attempt at disdain. And Mr. Loseby stood with his spectacles pushed up on his forehead, as if with a desire not to see, holding his little bald head high in the air, with a fine indignation in every line of his figure. Heathcote, who was brought in to sign as one of the witnesses, felt that it needed all his consciousness of the importance of what was going on to save him from indecorous laughter. When Mr. Mountford said, 'I deliver this,' 'And I protest against it,' Mr. Loseby cried, in a vehement undertone, 'protest against it before earth and heaven.' 'Do you mean little Thompson there and Heathcote Mountford?' said the testator, looking up with a laugh that was more like a snarl. And Heathcote too perceived that his very lips were palish, bluish, and the hand not so steady as usual with which he pushed the papers away.

But Mr. Mountford recovered himself with great courage. 'Now that I have finished my business, we will have time to consider your proposition,' he said, putting his hand on Heathcote's shoulder as he got up from his chair. 'That is, if you have time to think of anything serious in the midst of all this ball nonsense. You must come over for the ball, Loseby, a gay young bachelor like you.'

'You forget I am a widower, Mr. Mountford,' said the lawyer, with great gravity.

'To be sure; I beg your pardon; but you are always here when there is anything going on; and while the young fools are dancing, we'll consider this question of the entail.'

'I don't know what he means,' Mr. Loseby said, some time after taking Heathcote into a corner; 'consider the question of the entail the moment he has made another will! I'll tell you what it is—he is repenting already. I thought what I said couldn't be altogether without effect. St. John Mountford is as obstinate as a pig, but he is not a fool. I thought he must be touched by what I said. That's how it is; he would not seem to give in to us; but if you agree on this point, it will be a fine excuse for beginning it all over again. That's a new light—and it's exactly like him—it's St. John Mountford all over,' said the lawyer, rubbing his hands; 'as full of crotchets as an egg is full of meat—but yet not such a bad fellow after all.'

The household, however, had no such consoling consciousness of the possibility there was of having all done over again, and there was a great deal of agitation on the subject, both upstairs and down. Very silent upstairs—where Mrs. Mountford, in mingled compunction on Anne's account and half-guilty joy (though it was none of her doing she said to herself) in respect to Rose's (supposedly) increased fortune, was reduced to almost complete

dumbness, her multiplicity of thoughts making it impossible to her to share in Rose's chatter about the coming ball; and where Anne, satisfied to think that whatever was to happen had happened, and could no longer be supposed to depend upon any action of hers, sat proud and upright by the writing-table, reading—and altogether out of the talk which Rose carried on, and was quite able to carry on whatever happened, almost entirely by herself. Rose had the same general knowledge that something very important was going on as the rest; but to her tranquil mind, a bird in the hand was always more interesting than two or three in the bush. Downstairs, however, Saymore and Worth and the cook were far from silent. They had a notion of the state of affairs which was wonderfully accurate, and a strong conviction that Miss Anne for her sins had been deposed from her eminence and Miss Rose put in her place. The feeling of Saymore and the cook was strong in Anne's favour, but Mrs. Worth was not so certain. 'Miss Rose is a young lady that is far more patient to have her things tried on,' Worth said. Saymore brought down an account of the party in the drawing-room, which was very interesting to the select party in the housekeeper's room. 'Missis by the side of the fire, as serious as a judge--puckering up her brows—never speaking a word.'

'I dare say she was counting,' said Worth.

'And Miss Anne up by the writing-table, with her back against the wall, reading a book, never taking no notice no more than if she were seventy; and Miss Rose a-chattering. The two before the fire had it all their own way. They were writing down and counting up all the folks for this dance. Dash the dance!' said Saymore; 'that sort of a nonsense is no satisfaction to reasonable folks. But Miss Rose, she's as merry as a cricket with her Cousin Heathcote and Cousin Heathcote at every

word. She knows it's all to her advantage what's been a-doing to-day.'

'That might be a match, I shouldn't wonder—eh!' said the cook, who was from the north-country; 'the luck as some folks have—I never can understand these queer wills; why can't gentlefolks do like poor folks, and divide fair, share and share alike? As for what you call entail, I don't make head or tail of it; but if Miss Rose's to get all the brass, and marry the man with the land, and Miss Anne to get nought, it's easy to see that isn't fair.'

'If it's the cousin you mean,' said Mrs. Worth, 'he is just twice too old for Miss Rose.'

'Then he will know how to take care of her,' said Saymore, which made the room ring with laughter: for though the affairs of the drawing-room were interesting, there was naturally a still warmer attraction in the drama going on downstairs.

Mr. Mountford was in his room alone. He had retired there after dinner, as was his custom. At dinner he had been very serious. He had not been able to get Mr. Loseby's words out of his mind. Every word a nail in his coffin! What superstitious folly it was! No man ever died the sooner for attending to his affairs, for putting them in order, he said to himself. But this was not simply putting them in order. His mind was greatly disturbed. He had thought that, as soon as he had done it he would be relieved and at ease from the pressure of the irritation which had disturbed him so; but now that it was done he was more disturbed than ever. Perhaps for the first time he fully realised that, if anything should happen to himself, one of his children would be made to sustain the cruellest disappointment and wrong. 'It will serve her right,' he tried to say to himself, 'for the way she has behaved to me;' but when it became really apparent to him that this would be, not merely a

tremendous rebuff and discomfiture for Anne, but a settled fate which she could not escape, a slight shiver ran through him. He had not seen this so plainly before. He had meant to punish her, cruelly, even bitterly, and with an ironical completeness. But then he had never meant to die. This made a greater difference than it was possible to say. He meant that she should know that her marriage was impossible; that he had the very poorest opinion of the man she had chosen; that he would not trust him, and was determined never to let him handle a penny of his (Mr. Mountford's) money. In short, he said to himself, what he meant was to save Anne from this adventurer, who would no longer wish to marry her when he knew her to be penniless. He meant, he persuaded himself, that his will should have this effect in his lifetime; he meant it to be known, and set things right, not in the future, but at once. Now that all was done he saw the real meaning of the tremendous instrument he had made for the first time. To save Anne from an adventurer—not to die and leave her without provision, not really to give anything away from her, though she deserved it after the way in which she had defied him, had been his intention. Mr. Mountford thought this over painfully, not able to think of anything else. Last night even, no later, he had been thinking it over vindictively, pleased with the cleverness and completeness with which he had turned the tables upon his daughter. It had pleased him immoderately before it was done. But now that it was done, and old Loseby, like an old fool, had thrown in that bit of silly superstition about the nails in his coffin, it did not please him any longer. His face had grown an inch or two longer, nothing like a smile would come whatever he might do. When his wife came 'to sit with him,' as she often did, perturbed herself, half frightened, half exultant, and eager to learn all she could, he sent her away impa-

tiently. 'I have a great deal to do,' he said. 'What do I care for your ball? For heaven's sake let me have a little quiet. I have a great mind to say that there shall be no ball——' 'Papa!' his wife said, 'you would not be so unkind. Rose has set her heart on it so.' 'Oh confound——!' he said. Did he mean confound Rose, whom he had just chosen to be his heir, whom he had promoted to the vacant place of Anne? All through this strange business Mrs. Mountford's secret exultation, when she dared to permit herself to indulge it, in the good fortune of her daughter had been chequered by a growing bitterness in the thought that, though Rose was to have the inheritance, Anne still retained by far the higher place even in her husband's thoughts. He was resolved apparently that nobody should have any satisfaction in this overturn—not even the one person who was benefited. Mrs. Mountford went away with a very gloomy countenance after the confound——! The only thing that gave her any consolation was to see the brisk conversation going on between her daughter and Heathcote Mountford. Anne sat stiff and upright, quite apart from them, reading, but the two who were in front of the cheerful fire in the full light of the lamp were chattering with the gayest ease. Even Mrs. Mountford wondered at Rose, who surely knew enough to be a little anxious, a little perturbed as her mother was—but who showed no more emotion than the cricket that chirped on the hearth. Was it mere innocence and childish ease of heart, or was it that there was no heart at all? Even her mother could not understand her. And Heathcote, too, who knew a great deal, if not all that was going on, though he threw back lightly the ball of conversation, wondered at the gaiety of this little light-minded girl who was not affected, not a hair's breadth, by the general agitation of the house, nor by the disturbed countenance

of her mother, nor by her sister's seriousness. He talked—it was against his principles not to respond to the gay challenges thrown out to him—but he wondered. Did she know nothing, though everybody else knew? Was she incapable of divining that other people were in trouble? The conversation was very lively in front of the fire, but he, too, as well as the others, wondered at Rose.

And Mr. Mountford alone in his library thought, and over again thought. Supposing after all, incredible as it seemed, that *he was to die*? He did not entertain the idea, but it took possession of him against his will. He got up and walked about the room in the excitement it caused. He felt his pulse almost involuntarily, and was a little comforted to feel that it was beating just as usual; but if it should happen as Loseby said? He would not acknowledge to himself that he had done a wrong thing, and yet, if anything of that sort were to take place, he could not deny that the punishment he had inflicted was too severe. Whereas, as he intended it, it was not a punishment, but a precaution; it was to prevent Anne throwing herself away upon an adventurer, a nobody. Better even that she should have no money than be married for her money, than fall into the hands of a man unworthy of her. But then, supposing he were to die, and this will, made—certainly, as he persuaded himself, as a mere precautionary measure—should become final? That would make a very great difference. For a long time Mr. Mountford thought over the question. He was caught in his own net. After all that had been said and done, he could not change the will that he had made. It was not within the bounds of possibility that he should send for that little busybody again and acknowledge to him that he had made a mistake. What was there that he could do? He sat up long beyond his usual hour. Saymore,

extremely curious and excited by so strange an incident, came to his door three several times to see that the fire was out and to extinguish the lamp, and received the last time such a reception as sent the old man hurrying along the passages at a pace nobody had ever seen him adopt before, as if in danger of his life. Then Mrs. Mountford came, very anxious, on tiptoe in her dressing-gown, to see if anything was the matter; but she too retired more quickly than she came. He let his fire go out, and his lamp burn down to the last drop of oil—and it was only when he had no more light to go on with, and was chilled to death, that he lighted his candle and made his way to his own room through the silent house.

The victim herself was somewhat sad. She had spent the evening in a proud and silent indignation, saying nothing, feeling the first jar of fate, and the strange pang of the discovery that life was not what she had thought, but far less moved by what her father had done than by the failure round of her understanding and support. And when she had gone to her room, she had cried as did not misbecome her sex and her age, but then had read Cosmo's letter over again, and had discovered a new interpretation for it, and reading between the lines, had found it all generosity and nobleness, and forthwith reconciled herself to life and fate. But her father had no such ready way of escape. He was the master of Anne's future in one important respect, the arbiter of the family existence, with the power of setting up one and putting down another; but he had no reserve of imaginative strength, no fund of generous and high-flown sentiment, no love-letter to restore his courage. He did what he could to bring that courage back. During the hours which he spent unapproachable in his library, he had been writing busily, producing pages of manuscript, half of which he had destroyed

as soon as it was written. At the end, however, he so far satisfied himself as to concoct something of which he made a careful copy. The original he put into one envelope, the duplicate into another, and placed these two packets in the drawer of his writing-table, just as his light failed him. As he went upstairs his cold feet and muddled head caused him infinite alarm, and he blamed himself in his heart for risking his health. What he had done in his terror that night might have been left till to-morrow; whereas he might have caught cold, and cold might lead to bronchitis. Every word a nail in his coffin! What warrant had Loseby for such a statement? Was there any proof to be given of it? Mr. Mountford's head was buzzing and confused with the unusual work and the still more unusual anxiety. Perhaps he had caught an illness; he did not feel able to think clearly or even to understand his own apprehensions. He felt his pulse again before he went to bed. It was not feverish—yet: but who could tell what it might be in the morning? And his feet were so cold that he could not get any warmth in them, even though he held them close to the dying fire.

He was not, however, feverish in the morning, and his mind became more placid as the day went on. The two packets were safe in the drawer of the writing-table. He took them out and looked at them as a man might look at a bottle of quack medicine, clandestinely secured and kept in reserve against an emergency. He would not care to have his possession of it known, and yet there it was, should the occasion to try it occur. He felt a little happier to know that he could put his hands upon it should it be wanted—or at least a little less alarmed and nervous. And days passed on without any symptoms of cold or other illness. There was no sign or sound of these nails driven into his coffin. And the atmosphere

grew more clear in the house. Anne, between whom and himself there had been an inevitable reserve and coldness, suddenly came out of that cloud, and presented herself to him the Anne of old, with all the sweetness and openness of nature. The wrong had now been accomplished, and was over, and there was a kind of generous amusement to Anne in the consternation which her sudden return to all her old habits occasioned among the people surrounding her, who knew nothing of her inner life of imaginative impulse and feeling. She took her cottage-plans into the library one morning with her old smile as if nothing had happened or could happen. The plans had been all pushed aside in the silent combat between her father and herself. Mr. Mountford could not restrain a little outburst of feeling, which had almost the air of passion. 'Why do you bring them to me? Don't you know you are out of it, Anne? Don't you know I have done—what I told you I should do?'

'I heard that you had altered your will, papa; but that does not affect the cottagers. They are always there whoever has the estate.'

'Don't you mind, then, who has the estate?'

'Yes, immensely,' said Anne, with a smile. 'I could not have thought I should mind half so much. I have felt the coming down and being second. But I am better again. You have a right to do what you please, and I shall not complain.'

He sat in his chair at his writing-table (in the drawer of which were still those two sealed packets) and looked at her with contemplative, yet somewhat abashed eyes. There was an unspeakable relief in being thus entirely reconciled to her, notwithstanding the sense of discomfiture and defeat it gave him. 'Do you think—your sister—will be able to manage property?' he said.

'No doubt she will marry, papa.'

‘Ah!’ he had not thought of this somehow. ‘She will marry, and my substance will go into the hands of some stranger, some fellow I never heard of; that is a pleasant prospect: he will be a fool most likely, whether he is an adventurer or not.’

‘We must all take our chance, I suppose,’ said Anne, with a little tremor in her voice. She knew the adventurer was levelled at herself. ‘I suppose you have made it a condition that he shall take the name of Mountford, papa?’

He made her no reply, but looked up suddenly with a slight start. Oddly enough he had made no stipulation in respect to Rose. It had never occurred to him that it was of the slightest importance what name Rose’s husband should bear. He gave Anne a sudden startled look; then, for he would not commit himself, changed the subject abruptly. After this interval of estrangement it was so great a pleasure to talk to Anne about the family affairs. ‘What do you think,’ he said, ‘about Heathcote’s proposal, Anne?’

‘I should have liked to jump at it, papa. Mount in our own family! it seemed too good to be true.’

‘Seemed! you speak as if it were in the past. I have not said no yet. I have still got the offer in my power. Mount in our own family! but we have not got a family—a couple of girls!’

‘If we had not been a couple of girls there would have been no trouble about the entail,’ said Anne, permitting herself a laugh. ‘And of course Rose’s husband——’

‘I know nothing about Rose’s husband,’ he cried testily. ‘I never thought of him. And so you can talk of all this quite at your ease?’ he added. ‘You don’t mind?’

This was a kind of offence to him, as well as a satisfaction. She had no right to think so little of it: and yet what a relief it was!

Anne shook her head and smiled. 'It is better not to talk of it at all,' she said.

This conversation had a great effect upon Mr. Mountford. Though perhaps it proved him more wrong than ever, it restored him to all the ease of family intercourse which had been impeded of late. And it set the whole house right. Anne, who had been in the shade, behind backs, resigning many of her usual activities on various pretences, came back naturally to her old place. It was like a transformation scene. And everybody was puzzled, from Mrs. Mountford, who could not understand it at all, and Heathcote, who divined that some compromise had been effected, to the servants, whose interest in Miss Anne rose into new warmth, and who concluded that she had found means at last 'to come over master,' which was just what they expected from her. After this everything went on very smoothly, as if the wheels of life had been freshly oiled, and velvet spread over all its roughnesses. Even the preparations for the ball proceeded with far more spirit than before. The old wainscoted banqueting-room, which had not been used for a long time, though it was the pride of the house, was cleared for dancing, and Anne had already begun to superintend the decoration of it. Everything went on more briskly from the moment that she took it in hand, for none of the languid workers had felt that there was any seriousness in the preparations till Anne assumed the direction of them. Heathcote, who was making acquaintance very gradually with the differing characters of the household, understood this sudden activity less than anything before. 'Is it for love of dancing?' he said. Anne laughed and shook her head.

'I don't know that I shall enjoy this ball much; but I am not above dancing—and I enjoy *this*,' she said. 'I like to be doing something.' To have

regained her own sense of self-command, her superiority to circumstances, made this magnanimous young woman happy in her downfall. She liked the knowledge that she was magnanimous almost more than the good fortune and prosperity which she had lost. She had got over her misfortunes. She gave her head a little toss aloft, shaking off all shadows, as she ran hither and thither, the soul of everything. She had got the upper hand of fate.

As for Mr. Mountford, he had a great deal more patience about the details of the approaching entertainment when Anne took them in hand. Either she managed to make them amusing to him, or the additional reality in the whole matter, from the moment she put herself at the head of affairs, had a corresponding effect upon her father. Perhaps, indeed, a little feeling of making up to her, by a more than ordinary readiness to accept all her lesser desires, was in his mind. His moroseness melted away. He forgot his alarm about his health and Mr. Loseby's ugly words. It is possible, indeed, that he might have succeeded in forgetting altogether what he had done, or at least regaining his feeling that it was a mere expedient to overawe Anne and bring her into order, liable to be changed as everything changes—even wills, when there are long years before the testator—but for the two sealed envelopes in his drawer which he could not help seeing every time he opened it. A day or two before the ball some business called him into Hunston, and he took them out with a half smile, weighing them in his hand. Should he carry them with him and put them in Loseby's charge? or should he leave them there? He half laughed at the ridiculous expedient to which Loseby's words had driven him, and looked at the two letters jocularly; but in the end he determined to take them. It would be as well to put them in old Loseby's hands. Heathcote volunteered to ride

with him as he had done before. It was again a bright calm day, changed only in so far as November is different from October. There had been stormy weather in the meantime, and the trees were almost bare; but still it was fine and bright. Anne came out from the hall and stood on the steps to see them ride off. She gave them several commissions: to inquire at the bookseller's for the ball programmes, and to carry to the haberdasher's a note of something Mrs. Worth wanted. She kissed her hand to her father as he rode away, and his penitent heart gave him a prick. 'You would not think that was a girl that had just been cut off with a shilling,' he said, half mournfully (as if it had been a painful necessity), and half with parental braggadocio, proud of her pluck and spirit.

'I thought you must have changed your mind,' Heathcote said.

Mr. Mountford shook his head and said, 'No, worse luck. I have not changed my mind.'

This was the only expression of changed sentiment to which he gave vent. When they called at Mr. Loseby's, the lawyer received them with a mixture of satisfaction and alarm. 'What's up now?' he said, coming out of the door of his private room to receive them. 'I thought I should see you presently.' But when he was offered the two sealed letters Mr. Loseby drew back his hand as if he had been stung. 'You have been making another will,' he said, 'all by yourself, to ruin your family and make work for us lawyers after you are dead and gone.'

'No,' said Mr. Mountford, eagerly, 'no, no—it is only some stipulations.'

The packets were each inscribed with a legend on the outside, and the lawyer was afraid of them. He took them gingerly with the ends of his fingers, and let them drop into one of the boxes which lined

his walls. As for Mr. Mountford, he became more jaunty and pleased with himself every moment. He went to the haberdasher's for Mrs. Worth, and to the stationer's to get the programmes which had been ordered for the ball. He was more cheerful than his companion had ever seen him. He opened the subject of the entail of his own accord as they went along. 'Loseby is coming for the ball: it is a kind of thing he likes; and then we shall talk it over,' he said. Perhaps in doing this a way might be found of setting things straight, independent of these sealed packets, which, however, in the meantime, were a kind of sop to fate, a propitiation to Nemesis. Then they rode home in cheerful talk. By the time night fell they had got into the park; and though the trees stood up bare against the dark blue sky, and the grass looked too wet and spongy for pleasant riding, there was still some beauty in the dusky landscape. Mount, framed in its trees and showing in the distance the cheerful glow of its lights, had come in sight. 'It is a pleasant thing to come home, and to know that one is looked for and always welcome,' Mr. Mountford said. Heathcote had turned round to answer, with some words on his lips about his own less happy lot, when suddenly the figure at his side dropped out of the dusk around them. There was a muffled noise, a floundering of horse's hoofs, a dark heap upon the grass, moving, struggling, yet only half discernible in the gloom, over which he almost stumbled and came to the ground also, so sudden was the fall. His own horse swerved violently, just escaping its companion's hoof. And through the darkness there ran a sharp broken cry, and then a groan: which of them came from his own lips Heathcote did not know.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CATASTROPHE.

ALL was pleasant commotion and stir in Mount, where almost every room had received some addition to its decoration. On this particular evening there was a great show of candles in the old banqueting hall, which was to be the ballroom, and great experiments in lighting were going on. The ball at Mount was stirring the whole county. In all the houses about there was more or less commotion, toilets preparing, an additional thrill of liveliness and pleasure sent into the quiet country life. And Mount itself was all astir. Standing outside, it was pretty to watch the lights walking about the full house, gliding along the long corridors, gleaming at windows along the whole breadth of the rambling old place. With all these lights streaming out into the night, the house seemed to warm the evening air, which was now white with inevitable mists over the park. Rose ran about like a child, delighted with the stir, dragging holly wreaths after her, and holding candles to all the workers; but Anne had the real work in hand. It was to her the carpenters came for their orders, and the servants who never knew from one half-hour to another what next was to be done. Mrs. Mountford had taken the supper under her charge, and sat serenely over her worsted work, in the consciousness that whatever might go wrong, that, at least, would be right. 'As for your decorations, I wash my hands of them,' she said. It was Anne upon whom all these cares fell. And though she was by no means sure that she would enjoy the ball, it was quite certain, as she had said to Heathcote, that she enjoyed *this*. She enjoyed the sensation of being

herself again, and able to throw herself into this occupation with a fine indifference to her own personal standing in the house. If she had been dethroned in the will, only herself could dethrone her in nature. She felt, as she wished to feel, that she was above all that; that she was not even under the temptation of sullenness, and had no sense of injury to turn the sweet into bitter. She went about holding her head consciously a little higher than usual, as with a gay defiance of all things that could pull her down. Who could pull her down, save herself? And what was the use of personal happiness, of that inspiration and exhilaration of love which was in her veins, if it did not make her superior to all little external misfortunes? She felt magnanimous, and to feel so seemed to compensate her for everything else. It would have been strange, indeed, she said to herself, if the mere loss of a fortune had sufficed to crush the spirit of a happy woman, a woman beloved, with a great life before her. She smiled at fate in her faith and happiness. Her head borne higher than usual, thrown back a little, her eyes shining, a smile, in which some fine contempt for outside trouble just touched the natural sweetness of her youth, to which, after all, it was so natural to take pleasure in all that she was about—all these signs and marks of unusual commotion in her mind; of the excitement of a crisis about her, struck the spectators, especially the keen-sighted ones below stairs. 'It can't be like we think. She's the conquering hero, Miss Anne is. She's just like that army with banners as is in the Bible,' said the north-country cook. 'I don't understand her not a bit.' Saymore said, who knew better, who was persuaded that Anne had not conquered. Mrs. Worth opined that it was nature and nothing more. 'A ball is a ball, however downhearted you may be; it cheers you up, whatever is a going to happen,' she said; but

neither did this theory find favour in old Saymore's eyes.

What a beehive it was! Rooms preparing for the visitors who were to come to-morrow, linen put out to air, fires lighted, housemaids busy; in the kitchen all the cook's underlings, with aids from the village, already busy over the ball supper. Even Mrs. Mountford had laid aside her worsted work, and was making bows of ribbons for the cotillon. There was to be a cotillon. It was 'such fun,' Rose had said. In the ballroom the men were busy hammering, fixing up wreaths, and hanging curtains. Both the girls were there superintending, Rose half encircled by greenery. There was so much going on, so much noise that it was difficult to hear anything. And it must have been a lull in the hammering, in the consultation of the men, in the moving of step-ladders and sound of heavy boots over the floor, which allowed that faint sound to penetrate to Anne's ear. What was it? 'What was that?' she cried. They listened a moment, humouring her. What should it be? The hammers were sounding gaily, John Stokes, the carpenter belonging to the house, mounted high upon his ladder, with tacks in his mouth, his assistant holding up to him one of the muslin draperies. The wreaths were spread out over the floor. Now and then a maid put in her head to gaze, and admire, and wonder. 'Oh, you are always fancying something, Anne,' said Rose. 'You forget how little time we have.' Then suddenly it came again, and everybody heard. A long cry, out of the night, a prolonged halloo. John Stokes himself put down his hammer. 'It's somebody got into the pond,' he said. 'No, it's the other side of the park,' said the other man. Anne ran out to the corridor, and threw open the window at the end, which swept a cold gust through all the house. A wind seemed to have got up at that moment,

though it had been calm before. Then it came again, a long, far-echoing 'halloo—halloo—help!' Was it 'help' the voice cried? No doubt it was an appeal, whatever it was.

The men threw down their hammers and rushed downstairs with a common instinct, to see what it was. Anne stood leaning out of the window straining her eyes in the milky misty air, which seemed to grow whiter and less clear as she gazed. 'Oh please put down the window,' cried Rose, shivering, 'it is so cold—and what good can we do? It is poachers, most likely; it can't be anybody in the pond, or they wouldn't go on shrieking like that.' Saymore, who had come up to look at the decorations, gave the same advice. 'You'll get your death of cold, Miss Anne, and you can't do no good; maybe it's something caught in a snare—they cry like Christians, them creatures do, though we call 'em dumb creatures; or it's maybe a cart gone over on the low road—the roads is very heavy; or one of the keepers as has found something; it's about time for Master and Mr. Heathcote coming back from Hunston; they'll bring us news. Don't you be nervish, Miss Anne; they'll see what it is. I've known an old owl make just such a screeching.'

'Could an owl say "halloo,"' said Anne, 'and "help"? I am sure I heard "help." I hear somebody galloping up to the door—no, it is not to the door, it is to the stables. It will be papa or Heathcote come for help. I am sure it is something serious,' she said. And she left the great window wide open, and rushed downstairs. As for Rose she was very chilly. She withdrew within the warmer shelter of the ballroom, and arranged the bow of ribbon with which one of the hangings was to be finished. 'Put down the window,' she said; 'it can't do anyone any good to let the wind pour in like that, and chill all the house.'

Heathcote had been half an hour alone in the great wilderness of the park, nothing near him that could help, the trees rustling in the wind, standing far off round about like a scared circle of spectators, holding up piteous hands to heaven, but giving no aid. He was kneeling upon the horse's head, himself no more than a protuberance in the fallen mass, unable to get any answer to his anxious questions. One or two groans were all that he could elicit, groans which grew fainter and fainter; he shouted with all his might, but there seemed nothing there to reply—no passing labourer, no one from the village making a short cut across the park, as he had seen them do a hundred times. The mist rose up out of the ground, choking him, and, he thought, stifling his voice; the echoes gave him back the faint sounds which were all he seemed able to make. His throat grew dry and hoarse. Now and then the fallen horse gave a heave, and attempted to fling out, and there would be another scarcely articulate moan. His helplessness went to his very heart; and there, almost within reach, hanging suspended, as it were, between heaven and earth, were the lights of the house, showing with faint white haloes round them, those lights which had seemed so full of warmth and welcome. When the first of the help-bringers came running, wildly flashing a lantern about, Heathcote's limbs were stiffened and his voice scarcely audible; but it required no explanation to show the state of the case. His horse, which had escaped when he dismounted, had made its way to the stable door, and thus roused a still more effectual alarm. Then the other trembling brute was got to its legs, and the body liberated. The body!—what did they mean? There was no groan now or cry—'Courage, sir, courage—a little more patience and you will be at home,' Heathcote heard himself saying. To whom? There was no

reply; the groan would have been eloquence. But he could not permit himself to believe that the worst had come. He kept on talking, not knowing what he was doing, while they brought something, he did not know what, to place the motionless figure upon. 'Softly, softly!' he cried to the men, and took the limp hand into his own, and continued to speak. He heard himself talking, going along, repeating always the same words, 'A little longer, only a little longer. Keep up your heart, sir, we are nearly there.' When they had almost reached the door of the house, one of the bearers suddenly burst forth in a kind of loud sob, 'Don't you, sir, don't you now!—don't you see as he'll never hear a spoken word again?'

Then Heathcote stopped mechanically, as he had been speaking mechanically. His hat had been knocked off his head. His dress was wet and muddy, his hair in disorder, his whole appearance wild and terrible. When the light from the door fell full upon him, and Anne stepped forward, he was capable of nothing but to motion her away with his hand. 'What is it?' she said, in an awe-stricken voice. 'Don't send me away. I am not afraid. Did papa find it? He ought to come in at once. Make him come in at once. What is it, Mr. Heathcote? I am not afraid.'

'Send the young lady away, sir,' cried the groom, imperatively. 'Miss Anne, I can't bring him in till you are out o' that. Good Lord, can't you take her away?'

'I am not afraid,' she said, very pale, ranging herself on one side to let them pass. Heathcote, who did not know what it was, any more than she did, laid a heavy hand upon her shoulder, and put her, almost roughly, out of the way. 'I will go,' she said, frightened. 'I will go—if only you will make papa come in out of the damp—it is so bad for his—— Ah!' She fell down upon her knees and

her cry rang through all the house. She had seen a sudden light from a lantern out of doors flash across the covered face, the locks of grey hair.

It was not long till everybody knew; from the top to the bottom of the great house the news ran in a moment. John Stokes, the carpenter, returned and mounted his ladder mechanically, to resume his work: then remembered, and got down solemnly and collected his tools, leaving one wreath up and half of the drapery. 'There won't be no ball here this time,' he said to his mate. 'You bring the step-ladder, Sam.' This was the first sign that one cycle of time, one reign was over, and another begun.

From that moment Heathcote Mountford's position was changed. He felt it before he had gone up the stairs, reverently following that which now he no longer addressed with encouraging human words, but felt to be the unapproachable and solemn thing it was. A man had ridden off for the doctor before they entered the house, but there was no question of a doctor to those who now laid their old master upon his bed. 'I should say instantaneous, or next to instantaneous,' the doctor said when he came; and when he heard of the few groans which had followed the fall, he gave it as his opinion that these had been but unconscious plaints of the body after all sense of pain or knowledge of what was happening had departed. The horse had put his foot into a hole in the spongy wet turf—a thing that might have happened any day, and which it was a wonder did not happen oftener. There were not even the usual questionings and wonderings as to how it came about, which are so universal when death seizes life with so little warning. Mr. Mountford had been in the habit of riding with a loose rein. He had unbounded confidence in his cob, which, now that the event had proved its danger, a groom came forward to say by no means de-

served his confidence, but had two or three times before stumbled with its rider. Heathcote felt that doctors and grooms alike looked to himself with something more than ordinary courtesy and respect. He walked away from the comfortable bedroom now turned into a solemn presence chamber, and all its homely uses intermitted, with a gravity he had not felt before for years. He was not this man's son, scarcely his friend, that his death should affect him so. But, besides the solemnity of the event thus happening in his presence, it changed his position even more than if he had been St. John Mountford's son. It would be barbarous to desert the poor women in their trouble; but how was he to remain here, a comparative stranger, their kinsman but their supplanter, become in a moment the master of the house in which these girls had been born, and which their mother had ruled for twenty years. He went to his room to change his wet and soiled clothes, with a sense of confusion and sadness that made everything unreal to him. His past as well as that of his kinsman had ended in a moment; his careless easy life was over, the indulgences which he had considered himself entitled to as a man upon whom nobody but Edward had any special claim. Now Edward's claims, for which he had been willing to sacrifice his patrimony, must be put aside perforce. He could no longer think of the arrangement which an hour ago he had been talking of so easily, which was to have been accomplished with so little trouble. It was in no way to be done now. Actually in a moment he had become Mountford of Mount, the representative of many ancestors, the proprietor of an old house and property, responsible to dependents of various kinds, and to the future and to the past. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye; no idea of this kind had crossed his mind during that long half-hour in the park, which looked like half a

year. A fatal issue had not occurred to him. It was not until he had reached the threshold of the house, until he felt hope and help to be near, until he had heard Anne's voice appealing to him to know what it was, that the whole meaning of it had burst upon him. St. John Mountford dead, and he himself master of the house! It was impossible that, apart from the appalling suddenness of the catastrophe, and the nervous agitation of his own share in it, the death of his cousin even in this startling and pitiful way should plunge him into grief. He was deeply shocked and awed and impressed—sorry for the ladies, stricken so unexpectedly with a double doom, loss of their head, loss of their home—and sorry beyond words for the poor man himself, thus snatched out of life in a moment without preparation, without any suggestion even of what was going to happen; but it was not possible that Heathcote Mountford could feel any private pang in himself. He was subdued out of all thought of himself, except that strange sensation of absolute change. He dressed mechanically, scarcely perceiving what it was he was putting on, in his usual evening clothes which had been laid out for him, just as if he had been dressing for the usual peaceful dinner, his kinsman in the next room doing the same, and the table laid for all the family party. Notwithstanding the absolute change that had occurred, the revolution in everything, what could a man do but follow mechanically the habitual customs of every day?

He dressed very slowly, sometimes standing by the fire idly for ten minutes at a time, in a half stupor of excitement, restless yet benumbed and incapable of either action or thought; and when this was accomplished went slowly along the long corridors to the drawing-room, still as if nothing had happened, though more had happened than he could fathom or realise. The change had gone

down before him and was apparent in every corner of the deserted place. There were two candles burning feebly on the mantelpiece, and the fire threw a little fitful light about, but that was all; and no one was there; of course it was impossible that anyone should be there—but Heathcote was strange to family trouble, and did not know what happened when a calamity like this came crashing down from heaven into the midst of a household of people. Mrs. Mountford's work was lying on the sofa with the little sheaf of bright-coloured wools, which she had been used to tuck under her arm when she went 'to sit with papa;' and on the writing-table there was the rough copy of the ball programme, corrected for the printer in Rose's hand. The programmes; it floated suddenly across his mind to recollect the commission they had received on this subject as they had ridden away; had they fulfilled it? he asked himself in his confusion; then remembered as suddenly how he who was lying upstairs had fulfilled it, and how useless it now was. Ball programmes! and the giver of the ball lying dead in the house within reach of all the preparations, the garlands, and ornaments. It was incredible, but it was true. Heathcote walked about the dark and empty room in a maze of bewildered trouble which he could not understand, troubled for the dead, and for the women, and for himself, who was neither one nor the other, who was the person to profit by it. It was no longer they who had been born here, who had lived and ruled here for so many years, but he himself who was supreme in the house. It was all his own. The idea neither pleased him nor excited, but depressed and bewildered him. His own house: and all his easy quiet life in the Albany, and his little luxuries in the way of art and of travel—all over and gone. It seemed unkind to think of this in the presence of calamity so much more serious. Yet how could he help it?

When some one came with a soft knock at the door he was startled as if it had been a ghost. It was Saymore who came into the room, neat in his evening apparel, dressed and trim whatever happened, making his little formal bow. 'The ladies, sir,' Saymore said, conquering a little huskiness, a little faltering in his own voice, 'send their compliments and they don't feel equal to coming down. They hope you will excuse them; and dinner is served, Mr. Mountford,' the old man said, his voice ending in a jar of broken sound, almost like weeping. Heathcote went downstairs very seriously, as if he had formed one of the usual procession. He seated himself at the end of the table, still decorated with all its usual prettinesses as for the family meal; he did all this mechanically, taking the place of the master of the house, without knowing that he did so, and sitting down as if with ghosts, with all those empty seats round the table and every place prepared. Was it real or was it a dream? He felt that he could see himself as in a picture, sitting there alone, eating mechanically, going through a semblance of the usual meal. The soup was set before him, and then the fish, and then—

'Saymore, old man,' Heathcote said suddenly, starting up, 'I don't know if this is a tragedy or a farce we are playing—I cannot stand it any longer—take all those things away.'

'It do seem an awful change, sir, and so sudden,' cried the old man, frightened by the sudden movement, and by this departure from the rigid rules of ceremony—yet relieved after his first start was over. And then old Saymore began to sob, putting down the little silver dish with the entrée. 'I've been his butler, sir, this thirty years, and ten years in the pantry before that, footman, and born on the property like. And all to be over, sir, in a moment; and he was a good master, sir, though strict. He was very

particular, but always a kind master. It'll be long before we'll get another like him—not but what I beg your pardon, Mr. Mountford. I don't make no doubt but them as serves you will give the same character to you.'

This good wish relieved the oppression with a touch of humour; but Heathcote did not dare to let a smile appear. 'I hope so, sir,' Saymore said. He rubbed his old eyes hard with his napkin. Then he took up again the little silver dish. 'It's sweet-breads, sir, and it won't keep; it was a great favourite with master. Have a little while it's hot. It will disappoint cook if you don't eat a bit; we must eat, whatever happens, sir,' the old man said.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WILL.

It is needless to dwell upon the gloom of the days that followed this event. Mr. Loseby came over from Hunston, as pale as he was rosy on ordinary occasions, and with a self-reproach that was half pathetic, half ludicrous. 'I said every word of that new will of his would be a nail in his coffin. God forgive me,' he said. 'How was I to know? A man should never take upon himself to prophesy. God knows what a murdering villain he feels if it chances to come true.'

'But nothing you said could have made the horse put his foot in that rabbit-hole,' Heathcote said.

'That is true, that is true,' said the little lawyer: and then he began the same plaint again. But he was very active and looked after everything, managing the melancholy business of the moment, the inquest, and the funeral. There was a great deal to

do. Telegrams flew about the country on all sides, warning the guests invited to the ball of what had happened—yet at least one carriage full of ladies in full ball dress had to be turned back from the lodge on the night when so much gaiety had been expected at Mount. Charley Ashley had come up from the rectory at once and took the position of confidential agent to the ladies, in a way that Heathcote Mountford could not do. He thought it wrong to forsake them, and his presence was needed as mourner at his cousin's funeral; otherwise he would have been glad to escape from the chill misery and solitude that seemed to shut down upon the house which had been so cheerful. He saw nothing of the ladies, save that now and then he would cross the path of Anne, who did not shut herself up like her step-mother and sister. She was very grave, but still she carried on the government of the house. When Heathcote asked her how she was, she answered with a serious smile, though with quick-coming moisture in her eyes: 'I am not ill at all; I am very well, Mr. Heathcote. Is it not strange one's grief makes no difference to one in that way? One thinks it must, one even hopes it must; but it does not; only my heart feels like a lump of lead.' She was able for all her work, just as usual, and saw Mr. Loseby and gave Charley Ashley the list of all the people to be telegraphed to, or to whom letters must be written. But Mrs. Mountford and Rose kept to their rooms, where all the blinds were carefully closed and every table littered with crape. Getting the mourning ready was always an occupation, and it did them good. They all went in a close carriage to the village church on the day of the funeral, but only Anne followed her father's coffin to the grave. It was when Heathcote stood by her there that he remembered again suddenly the odiousness of the idea that some man or other, a fellow whom nobody

knew, had managed to get between Anne Mountford and all the rest of the world. It was not a place for such a thought, yet it came to him in spite of himself, when he saw her falter for a moment and instinctively put out his arm to sustain her. She looked round upon him with a look in which gratitude and something like a proud refusal of his aid were mingled. That look suggested to him the question which suddenly arose in his mind, though, as he felt, nothing could be more inappropriate at such a time and place. Where was the fellow? Why was he not here? If he had permitted Anne to be disinherited for his sake, why had he not hurried to her side to support her in her trouble? Heathcote was not the only person who had asked himself this question. The Curate had not looked through Anne's list of names before he sent intelligence of Mr. Mountford's death to his friend. The first person of whom he had thought was Cosmo. 'Of course you will come to the rectory,' he telegraphed, sending him the news on the evening of the occurrence. He had never doubted that Cosmo would arrive next morning by the earliest train. All next day while he had been working for them, he had expected every hour the sound of the arrival, saying to himself, when the time passed for the morning and for the evening trains, that Cosmo must have been from home, that he could not have received the message, that of course he would come to-morrow. But when even the day of the funeral arrived without Cosmo, Charley Ashley's good heart was wrung with mingled wrath and impatience. What could it mean? He was glad, so far as he himself was concerned, for it was a kind of happiness to him to be doing everything for Anne and her mother and sister. He was proud and glad to think that it was natural he should do it, he who was so old a friend, almost like a brother to the girls. But the

other, who had a closer claim than that of any brother, who had supplanted Charley and pushed him aside, where was he? On this subject Anne did not say a word. She had written and received various letters, but she did not take anyone into her confidence. And yet there was a something in her eyes, a forlorn look, a resistance of any support, as if she had said to herself, 'Since I have not his arm I will have no one else's support.' Heathcote withdrew from her side with a momentary sense of a rebuff. He followed her down the little churchyard path and put her into the carriage, where the others were waiting for her, without a word. Then she turned round and looked at him again. Was it an appeal for forgiveness, for sympathy—and yet for not too much sympathy—which Anne was making? These looks of mingled feeling which have so much in them of the poetry of life, how difficult they are to interpret! how easily it may be that their meaning exists only in the eyes that see them! like letters which may be written carelessly, hastily, but which we weigh, every word of them, in balances of the sanctuary, too fine and delicate for earthly words, finding out so much more than the writer ever thought to say. Perhaps it was only Heathcote's indignant sense that the lover, for whom she had already suffered, should have been by Anne's side in her trouble that made him see so much in her eyes. Charley Ashley had been taking a part in the service; his voice had trembled with real feeling as he read the psalms; and a genuine tear for the man whom he had known all his life had been in his eye; but he, too, had seen Anne's looks and put his own interpretation upon them. When all was over, he came out of the vestry where he had taken off his surplice and joined Heathcote. He was going up to Mount, the general centre of everything at this moment. The mourners were going there to

luncheon, and afterwards the will was to be read. Already, Mr. Mountford being safely in his grave, covered with wreaths of flowers which everybody had sent, the interest shifted, and it was of this will and its probable revelations that everybody thought.

‘Have you any idea what it is?’ the Curate said; ‘you were in the house, you must have heard something. It is inconceivable that a just man should be turned into an unjust one by that power of making a will. He was a good man,’ Charley added, with a little gulp of feeling. ‘I have known him since I was *that* high. He never talked very much about it, but he never was hard upon anyone. I don’t think I ever knew him to be hard on anyone. He said little, but I am sure he was a good man at heart.’

Heathcote Mountford did not make any answer; he replied by another question: ‘Mr. Douglas is a friend of yours, I hear?’

‘Oh, yes, he is a friend of mine: it was I—we are such fools—that brought him. Just think—if it brings harm to Anne, as everybody seems to believe—that I should have to reflect that *I* brought him! I who would cut off a hand!—I see you are thinking how strange it is that he is not here.’

‘It is strange,’ Heathcote said.

‘Strange! strange is not the word. Why, even Willie is here: and he that could have been of such use——. But we must remember that Anne has her own ways of thinking,’ the Curate added. ‘He wrote half-a-dozen lines to me to say that he was at her orders, that he could not act of himself. Now, whether that meant that she had forbidden him to come—if so, there is a reason at once.’

‘I don’t think I should have been inclined to take such a reason,’ Heathcote said.

The Curate sighed. How could he consider what he would have done in such circumstances? he knew

that he would not have stopped to consider. 'You don't know Anne,' he said; 'one couldn't go against her—no, certainly one couldn't go against her. If she said don't come, you'd obey, whether you liked it or not.'

'I don't think I should. I should do what I thought right without waiting for anyone's order. What! a woman that has suffered for you, not to be there, not to be by, when she was in trouble! It is inconceivable. Ashley, your friend must be a—he must be, let us say the least——'

'Hush! I cannot hear any ill of him, he has always been my friend; and Anne—do you think anything higher could be said of a man than that Anne—you know what I mean.'

Heathcote was very sympathetic. He gave a friendly pressure to the arm that had come to be linked in his as they went along. The Curate had not been able to disburden his soul to anyone in these days past, when it had been so sorely impressed upon him that, though he could work for Anne, it was not his to stand by her and give her the truest support. Heathcote was sympathetic, and yet he could scarcely help smiling within himself at this good faithful soul, who, it was clear, had ventured to love Anne too, and, though so faithful still, had an inward wonder that it had been the other and not himself that had been chosen. The looker-on could have laughed, though he was so sorry. Anne, after all, he reflected, with what he felt to be complete impartiality, though only a country girl, was not the sort of young woman to be appropriated by a curate: that this good, heavy, lumbering fellow should sigh over her choice of another, without seeing in a moment that he and such as he was impossible! However, he pressed Charley's arm in sympathy, even though he could not refrain from this half derision in his heart.

‘He might have stayed at the rectory,’ Charley continued; ‘that is what I proposed—of course he could not have gone to Mount without an invitation. I had got his room all ready; I sent our old man up to meet two trains. I never for a moment supposed—Willie, of course, never thought twice. He came off from Cambridge as a matter of course.’

‘As any one would——’ said Heathcote.

‘Unless they had been specially forbidden to do it—there is always that to be taken into account.’

Thus talking, they reached the house, where, though the blinds had been drawn up, the gloom was still heavy. The servants were very solemn as they served at table, moving as if in a procession, asking questions about wine and bread in funereal whispers. Old Saymore’s eyes were red and his hand unsteady. ‘Thirty years butler, and before that ten years in the pantry,’ he said to everyone who would listen to him. ‘If I don’t miss him, who should? and he was always the best of masters to me.’ But the meal was an abundant meal, and there were not many people there whose appetites were likely to be affected by what had happened. Mr. Loseby, perhaps, was the one most deeply cast down, for he could not help feeling that he had something to do with it, and that St. John Mountford might still have been living had he not said that about the words of an unjust will being nails in the coffin of the man who made it. This recollection prevented him from enjoying his meal; but most of the others enjoyed it. Many of the luxurious dainties prepared for the ball supper appeared at this less cheerful table. The cook had thought it a great matter, since there was no ball, that there was the funeral luncheon when they could be eaten, for she could not bear waste. After the luncheon most of the people went away; and it was but a small party which adjourned

into the room where Mr. Mountford had spent most of his life, to hear the will read, to which everybody looked forward with excitement. Except Heathcote and the Rector, and Mr. Loseby, there was nobody present save the family. When Anne came, following her stepmother and sister, who went first, clinging together, she saw Charley Ashley in the hall, and called to him as she passed. 'Come,' she said softly, holding out her hand to him, 'I know you will be anxious—come and hear how it is.' He looked wistfully in her face, wondering if, perhaps, she asked him because he was Cosmo's friend; and perhaps Anne understood what the look meant; he could not tell. She answered him quietly, gravely. 'You are our faithful friend—you have been like our brother. Come and hear how it is.' The Curate followed her in very submissively, glad, yet almost incapable of the effort. Should he have to sit still and hear her put down out of her natural place? When they were all seated Mr. Loseby began, clearing his throat:

'Our late dear friend, Mr. Mountford, made several wills. There is the one of 1868 still in existence—it is not, I need scarcely say, the will I am about to propound. It was made immediately after his second marriage, and was chiefly in the interests of his eldest daughter, then a child. The will I am about to read is of a very different kind. It is one, I am bound to say, against which I thought it my duty to protest warmly. Words passed between us then which were calculated to impair the friendship which had existed between Mr. Mountford and myself all our lives. He was, however, magnanimous. He allowed me to say my say, and he did not resent it. This makes it much less painful to me than it might have been to appear here in a room so associated with him, and make his will known to you. I daresay this is all I need say, except that

after this will was executed, on the day indeed of his death, Mr. Mountford gave to me in my office at Hunston two sealed packets, one addressed to Miss Mountford and the other to myself, with a clause inserted on the envelope to the effect that neither was to be opened till Miss Rose should have attained her twenty-first birthday. I calculated accordingly that they must have something to do with the will. Having said this, I may proceed to read the will itself.'

The first part of the document contained nothing very remarkable. Many of the ordinary little bequests, legacies to servants, one or two to public institutions, and all that was to belong to his widow, were very fully and clearly enumerated. The attention of the little company was lulled as all this was read. There was nothing wonderful in it after all. The commonplace is always comforting: it relieves the strained attention far better than anything more serious or elevated. An unconscious relief came to the minds of all. But Mr. Loseby's voice grew husky and excited when he came to what was the last paragraph—

'All the rest of my property of every kind, including——[and here there was an enumeration of the unentailed landed property and money in various investments, all described] I leave to my eldest daughter, Anne Mountford——.' Here the reader made a little involuntary half-conscious pause of excitement—and all the anxious people round him testified the strain relieved, the wonder satisfied, and yet a new rising of wonder and pleasant disappointment. What did it mean? why then had their interest been thus raised, to be brought to nothing? Everything, then, was Anne's after all! There was a stir in which the next words would have been lost altogether, but for a louder clearing of the voice on the part of the reader, calling as it seemed for special

attention. He raised his hand evidently with the same object. 'I leave,' he repeated, 'to my eldest daughter, Anne Mountford—in trust for her sister, Rose——'

Mrs. Mountford, who had been seated in a heap in her chair, a mountain of crape, had roused up at the first words. She raised herself up in her chair forgetful of her mourning, not believing her ears; 'To Anne!' she said under her breath in strange dismay. Had it meant nothing then? Had all this agitation both on her own part and on that of her husband, who was gone, come to nothing, meant nothing? She had suffered much, Mrs. Mountford remembered now. She had been very unhappy; feeling deeply the injustice which she supposed was being done to Anne, even though she knew that Rose was to get the advantage—but now, to think that Rose had no advantage and Anne everything! So many things can pass through the mind in a single moment. She regretted her own regrets, her remonstrances with him (which she exaggerated), the tears she had shed, and her compunctions about Anne. All for nothing. What had he meant by it? Why had he filled her with such wild hopes to be all brought to nothing? The tears dried up in a moment. She faced Mr. Loseby with a scared pale face, resolving that, whatever happened, she would contest this will, and declare it to be a falsehood, a mistake. Then she, like all the others, was stopped by the cough with which Mr. Loseby recommenced, by the lifting of his finger. 'Ah!' she said unconsciously; and then among all these listening, wondering people, fell the other words like thunderbolts out of the skies, 'in trust—for her sister, Rose——' They sat and listened all in one gasp of suspended breathing, of eagerness beyond the power of description; but no one took in the words that followed. Anne was to have an income of five

hundred a year charged on the property till Rose attained her twenty-first year. Nobody paid any attention to this—nobody heard it even, so great grew the commotion; they began to talk and whisper among themselves before the reader had stopped speaking. Anne to be set aside, and yet employed, made into a kind of steward of her own patrimony for her sister's benefit; it was worse than disinheritance, it was cruelty. The Rector turned round to whisper to Heathcote, and Rose flung her arms about her mother. The girl was bewildered. 'What does it mean? what does it mean?' she cried. 'What is that about Anne—and me?'

'Mr. Loseby,' the Rector said, with a trembling voice, 'this cannot be so: there must be some mistake. Our dear friend, whom we have buried to-day, was a good man; he was a just man. It is not possible; there must be some mistake.'

'Mistake! I drew it out myself,' Mr. Loseby said. 'You will not find any mistake in it. There was a mistake in his own mind. I don't say anything against that; but in the will there's no mistake. I wish there was. I would drive a coach and six through it if I could; but it's all fast and strong. Short of a miracle, nobody will break that will—though I struggled against it. He was as obstinate as a mule, as they all are—all the Mountfords.'

'Mr. Loseby,' said Mrs. Mountford, 'I did not approve any more than you did. It was not any doing of mine. I protested against it; but my husband—my husband had his reasons.'

'There are no reasons that could justify this,' said the tremulous old Rector; 'it is a shame and a sin; it ought not to be. When a man's will is all wrong, the survivors should agree to set it right. It should not be left like that: it will bring a curse upon all who have anything to do with it,' said the

old man, who was so timid and so easily abashed. 'I am not a lawyer. I don't know what the law will permit; but the Gospel does not permit such injustice as this.'

Mr. Loseby had pushed his spectacles up on his forehead and listened with an astonishment which was tinctured first with awe, then with amusement. The old Rector, feeblest of men and preachers! The lawyer gazed at him as at a curiosity of nature. It was a fine thing in its way. But to attack a will of his, John Loseby's! He smiled at the folly, though he sympathised with the courage. After all, the old fellow had more in him than anybody thought.

Mrs. Mountford was roused too beyond her wont. 'My husband had his reasons,' she said, her pale face growing red; 'he never did anything without thought. I would not change what he had settled, not for all the world, not for a kingdom. I interfere to set a will aside! and *his* will! I don't think you know what you are saying. No one could have such a right.'

'Then it will bring a curse and no blessing,' said the Rector, getting up tremulously. 'I have nothing to do here; I said so at the first. Anne, my dear excellent child, this is a terrible blow for you. I wish I could take you out of it all. I wish—I wish that God had given me such a blessing as you for my daughter, my dear.'

Anne rose up and gave him her hand. All the usual decorums of such a meeting were made an end of by the extraordinary character of the revelation which had been made to them.

'Thank you, dear Mr. Ashley; but never think of me,' Anne said. 'I knew it would be so. And papa, poor papa, had a right to do what he pleased. We spoke of it together often; he never thought it would come to this. How was he to think what was to happen? and so soon—so soon. I feel sure,' she

said, her eyes filling with tears, 'it was for this, and not for pain, that he groaned after he fell.'

'He had need to groan,' said the Rector, shaking his head—'he had need to groan! I hope it may not be laid to his charge.' Mr. Ashley was too much moved to recollect the ordinary politenesses; he pushed his chair away, back to the wall, not knowing what he was doing. 'Come, Charley!' he said, 'come, Charley! I told you we had nothing to do here. We cannot mend it, and why should we be in the midst of it? It is more than I can bear. Come, Charley—unless you can be of use.'

But Mrs. Mountford felt it very hard that she should thus be disapproved of by her clergyman. It compromised her in every way. She began to cry, settling down once more into the midst of her crape. 'I don't know why you should turn against me,' she said, 'Mr. Ashley. I had nothing to do with it. I told him it would make me wretched if he punished Anne; but you cannot ask me to disapprove of my husband, and go against my husband, and he only to-day—only to-day——'

Here she was choked by genuine tears. Rose had kept close by her mother's side all the time. She cried occasionally, but she gave her attention closely to all that was going on, and the indignation of the bystanders at her own preferment puzzled her somewhat narrow understanding. Why should not she be as good an heiress as Anne? Why should there be such a commotion about her substitution for her sister? She could not make out what they meant. 'I will always stand by you, mamma,' she said, tremulously. 'Come upstairs. I do not suppose we need stay any longer, Mr. Loseby? There is nothing for us to do.'

'Nothing at all, Miss Rose,' said the lawyer. The men stood up while the ladies went away, Mrs. Mountford leaning on her child's arm. Anne, too,

stood aside to let them pass. There was no reason perhaps why they should have said anything to her; but she looked at them wistfully, and her lip trembled a little. There were two of them, but of her only one. One alone to face the world. She cast a glance round upon the others who were all of her faction, yet not one able to stand by her, to give her any real support. Once more, two of them at least felt that there was an appeal in her eyes—not to them, nor to any one—a secret sense of the cruelty of—what?—circumstances, fate, which left her quite alone at such a crisis. Then she, too, turned to the lawyer. ‘May I go too?’ she said. ‘No doubt there will be a great deal for me to learn and to do; but I need not begin, need I, to-day?’

‘My dear Miss Anne,’ cried Mr. Loseby, ‘I don’t know that you need to accept the trust at all. I said to him I should be disposed to throw it into Chancery, and to make your sister a ward of the Court. I don’t know that you need to accept it at all——’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said, with a smile. ‘I will accept it. I will do it. My father knew very well that I would do it; but I need not begin, need I, to-day?’

CHAPTER XXI.

WHEN ALL WAS OVER.

THE night dropped over Mount very darkly, as dark a November night as ever fell, fog and damp heaviness over everything outside, gloom and wonder and bewilderment within. Mr. Loseby stayed all night and dined with Heathcote, to his great relief. Nobody else came downstairs. Mrs. Mountford, though she felt all the natural and proper grief for her great loss, was not by any means unable to appear, and

Rose, who was naturally tired of her week's seclusion, would have been very glad to do so ; but her mother was of opinion that they ought not to be capable of seeing anyone on the funeral day, and their meal was brought up to their rooms as before. They played a melancholy little game of *béziq*ue together afterwards, which was the first symptom of returning life which Mrs. Mountford had permitted herself to be able for. Anne had joined them in Mrs. Mountford's sitting-room, and had shared their dinner, which still was composed of some of the delicacies from the ball supper. In winter everything keeps so long. There had been very little conversation between them there, for they did not know what to say to each other. Mrs. Mountford, indeed, made a little set speech, which she had conned over with some care and solemnity. 'Anne,' she had said, 'it would not become me to say a word against what dear papa has done ; but I wish you to know that I had no hand in it. I did not know what it was till to-day : and, for that matter, I don't know now. I was aware that he was displeased and meant to make some change, and I entreated him not to do so. That was all I knew ——'

'I am sure you had nothing to do with it,' Anne said gently ; 'papa spoke to me himself. He had a right to do as he pleased. I for one will not say a word against it. I crossed him, and it was all in his hands. I knew what the penalty was. I am sure it has been a grief to you for some time back.'

'Indeed, you only do me justice, Anne,' cried her stepmother, and a kiss was given and received ; but perhaps it was scarcely possible that it should be a very warm caress. After they had eaten together Anne went back to her room, saying she had letters to write, and Rose and her mother played that game at *béziq*ue. It made the evening pass a little more

quickly than if they had been seated on either side of the fire reading good books. And when the *bézique* was over Mrs. Mountford went to bed. There are many people who find in this a ready way of getting through their superfluous time. Mrs. Mountford did not mind how soon she went to bed ; but this is not an amusement which commends itself to youth. When her mother was settled for the night, Rose, though she had promised to go too, felt a little stirring of her existence within her roused, perhaps, by the dissipation of the *bézique*. She allowed that she was tired ; but still, after her mother was tucked up for the night, she felt too restless to go to bed. Where could she go but to Anne's room, which had been her refuge all her life, in every trouble ? Anne was still writing letters, or at least one letter, which looked like a book, there was so much of it, Rose thought. She came behind her sister, and would have looked over her shoulder, but Anne closed her writing-book quickly upon the sheet she was writing. 'Are you tired, dear ?' she said—just, Rose reflected, like mamma.

'I am tired—of doing nothing, and of being shut up. I hope mamma will let us come downstairs to-morrow,' said Rose. Then she stole a caressing arm round her sister's waist. 'I wish you would tell me, Anne. What is it all about, and what does it mean ?'

'It is not so easy to tell. I did not obey papa——'

'Are you sorry, Anne ?'

'Sorry ? very sorry to have vexed him, dear. If I had known he would be with us only such a little time—but one never knows.'

'I should have thought you would have been too angry to be sorry——'

'Angry—when he is dead ?' said Anne, with quick rising tears. 'Oh, no ! if he had been living

I might have been angry ; but now to think he cannot change it, and perhaps would do anything to change it——’

Rose did not understand this. She said in a little, petulant voice, ‘Is it so dreadfully wrong to give it to me instead of you?’

‘There is no question of you or me,’ said Anne, ‘but of justice. It was my mother’s. You are made rich by what was hers, not his or anyone else’s. This is where the wrong lies. But don’t let us talk of it. I don’t mean to say a word against it, Rose.’

Then Rose roamed about the room, and looked at all the little familiar pictures and ornaments she knew. The room was more cheerful than her mother’s room, with all its heavy hangings, in which she had been living for a week. After a few minutes she came back and leaned upon Anne’s shoulder again.

‘I wish you would tell me what it means. What is In Trust? Have you a great deal to do with me?’ she said.

Anne’s face lighted up a little. ‘I have everything to do with you,’ she said ; ‘I am your guardian, I think. I shall have to manage your money and look after all your interests. Though I am poor and you are rich, you will not be able to do anything without me.’

‘But that will not last for ever,’ said Rose, with a return of the little, petulant tone.

‘No ; till you come of age. Didn’t you hear to-day what Mr. Loseby said ? and look, Ro-ie, though it will break your heart, look here.’

Anne opened her desk and took out from an inner drawer the sealed packet which Mr. Mountford had himself taken to the lawyer on the day of his death. The tears rose to her eyes as she took it out, and Rose, though curiosity was so strong in her as almost to quench emotion, felt something coming in

her throat at the first sight of her father's writing, so familiar as it was. 'For my daughter Anne, not to be opened till Rose's twenty-first birthday.' Rose read it aloud, wondering. She felt something come in her throat, but yet she was too curious, too full of the novelty of her own position, to be touched as Anne was. 'But that may change it all over again,' she said.

'It is not likely; he would not have settled things one day and unsettled them the next; especially as nothing had happened in the meantime to make him change again.'

Rose looked very curiously, anxiously, at the letter. She took it in her hand and turned it over and over. 'It must be about me, anyhow, I suppose——'

'Yes,' said Anne, with a faint smile, 'or me; perhaps he might think, after my work for you was over, that I might want some advice.'

'I suppose you will be married long before that?' said Rose, still poising the letter in her hands.

'I don't know—it is too early to talk of what is going to be done. You are tired, Rosie—go to bed.'

'Why should I be tired more than you? You have been doing a great deal, and I have been doing nothing. That is like mamma's way of always supposing one is tired, and wants to go to bed. I hate bed. Anne, I suppose you will get married—there can be nothing against it, now—only I don't believe he has any money: and if you have no money either——'

'Don't let us talk on the subject, dear—it is too early, it hurts me—and I want to finish my letter. Sit down by the fire—there is a very comfortable chair, and a book—if you don't want to go to bed.'

'Are you writing to Mr. Douglas, Anne?'

Anne answered only with a slight nod of her head. She had taken her pen into her hand. She

could not be harsh to her little sister this day above all others, in which her little sister had been made the means of doing her so much harm—but it cost her an effort to be patient. Rose, for her part, had no science to gain information from the inflections of a voice. ‘Why wasn’t he here to-day?’ was the next thing she said.

‘Rosie, dear, do you know I have a great deal to do? Don’t ask me so many questions,’ Anne said, piteously. But Rose was more occupied by her own thoughts than by anything her sister said.

‘He ought to have been at the funeral,’ she said, with that calm which was always so astonishing to her sister. ‘I thought when you went to the grave you must have known you were to meet him there. Mamma thought so, too.’

These words sank like stones into Anne’s heart; but there was a kind of painful smile on her face. ‘You thought I was thinking of meeting anyone there? Oh, Rose, did you think me so cold-hearted? I was thinking only of him who was to be laid there.’

‘I don’t mean that you are cold-hearted. Of course we were all wretched enough. Mamma said it would have been too much either for her or me; but you were always the strongest, and then of course we expected Mr. Douglas would be there.’

‘You do not know him,’ cried Anne, with a little vehemence: ‘you do not know the delicacy, the feeling he has. How was he to come intruding himself the moment that my father was gone—thrusting himself even into his presence, after being forbidden. A man of no feeling might have done it, but he— . Rosie, please go away. I cannot talk to you any more.’

‘Oh, was that how it was?’ Rose was silenced for the moment. She went away to the seat by the fire which her sister had pointed out to her. Anne

had not noticed that she had still the letter in her hands. And then she was quiet for some time, while her sister resumed her writing. Cosmo's conduct soon went out of Rose's head, while she occupied herself with the other more important matter which concerned herself. What might be in this letter of papa's? Probably some new change, some new will, something quite different. 'If I am not to be the heiress after all, only have the name of it for three years, what will be the use?' Rose said to herself. She was very sensible in her limited way. 'I would rather not have any deception or have the name of it, if it is going to be taken away from me just when I should want to have it.' She looked at the seals of the packet with longing eyes. If they would only melt—if they would but break of themselves. 'I wonder why we shouldn't read it now?' she said. 'It is not as if we were other people, as if we were strangers—we are his own daughters, his two only children—he could not have meant to hide anything from us. If you will open and read it, and tell me what it is, we need not tell anyone—we need not even tell mamma.'

'What are you talking of, Rose?'

'I am talking of papa's letter, of course. Why should you keep it, not knowing what harm it may be going to do—Anne! you hurt me—you hurt me!' Rose cried.

Anne sprang to her feet with the natural impetuosity which she tried so hard to keep under, and seized the letter out of her sister's hands.

'You must never speak nor think of anything of the kind,' she cried; 'my father's wish, his last charge to us——'

'I am sure,' said Rose, beginning to cry, 'you need not speak—it is you that refused to do what he told you, not I? This is quite innocent; what could it matter? It can't vex him now, whatever we do.'

for he will never know. I would not have disobeyed him when he was living—that is, not in anything serious, not for the world—but now, what can it matter, when he will never, never know?’

The utter scepticism and cynicism of the little childish creature, crying by the fire, did not strike Anne. It was only a naughtiness, a foolishness upon the child's part, nothing more. She restored the packet to the private drawer and locked it with energy, closing down and locking the desk, too. It was herself she blamed for having shown the packet, not Rose, who knew no better. But now it was clear that she must do, what indeed she generally had to do, when Rose claimed her attention—give up her own occupation, and devote herself to her sister. She came and sat down by her, leaving the letter in which her heart was. And Rose, taking advantage of the opportunity, tormented her with questions. When at last she consented to retire to her room, Anne could do nothing but sit by the fire, making a vain attempt to stifle the more serious questions, which were arising, whether she would or no, in her own heart. ‘Rose=prose,’ she had tried hard to say to herself, as so often before; but her lips quivered, so that a smile was impossible. She sat there for a long time after, trying to recover herself. She had arrived at a crisis of which she felt the pain without understanding the gravity of it. And indeed the sudden chaos of confusion and wonder into which she had wandered, she could not tell how, had no doubt so deadened the blow of the strange will to her, as to give her a heroism which was half stupidity, as so many heroisms are. She, too, had expected, like all the world, that Cosmo would have come to her at once—if not to Mount, yet to the rectory, where his friends would have received him. She had taken it for granted—though she had not said a word on the subject to anyone, nor even to herself, feeling that

to see him and feel him near her would be all the greater consolation if she had never said she looked for it, even in her own heart. She had not given his name to Charley Ashley as one of those to be informed by telegraph, nor had she mentioned his name at all, though she seemed to herself to read it in a continual question in the Curate's eyes. A chill had stolen over her when she heard nothing of him all the first long day. She had not permitted herself to ask or to think, but she had started at every opening door, and listened to every step outside, and even, with a pang which she would not acknowledge, had looked out through a crevice of the closed shutters, with an ache of wondering anguish in her heart, to see the Curate coming up the avenue alone on the second morning. But when Cosmo's letter came to her, by the ordinary return of post, Anne tried to say to herself that of course he was right and she was wrong—nay more than that—that she had known exactly all through which was the more delicate and noble way, and that it was this. How could he come to Mount, he who had been turned away from it (though this was not quite true), who had been the cause of her disinheritance? How could he present himself the moment the father, who had objected to him so strenuously, was dead? Cosmo laid the whole case before her with what seemed the noblest frankness, in that letter. 'I am in your hands,' he said. 'The faintest expression of a wish from you will change everything. Say to me, "Come," and I will come, how gladly I need not say—but without that word, how can I intrude into the midst of a grief which, believe me, my dearest, I shall share, for it will be yours, but which by all the rest of the world will seem nothing but a deliverance and relief to me.' Anne, who had not allowed herself to say a word, even to her own soul, of the sickening of disappointment and wonder in her, who had stood

bravely dumb and refused to be conscious that she had expected him, felt her heart leap up with a visionary triumph of approval, when this letter came. Oh, how completely and nobly right he was! How superior in his instinctive sense of what it was most delicately honourable and fit to do, in such an emergency, to any other, or to herself even, who ought to have known better!

She wrote instantly to say, 'You are right, dear Cosmo. You are more than right; how could anyone be so blind as not to see that this is what you ought to, what you must have done, and that nothing else was possible?' And since then she had said these words over to herself again and again—and had gone about all her occupations more proudly, more erect and self-sustaining, because of this evident impossibility that he should have been there, which the heavier people about, without his fine perceptions and understanding, did not seem to see. As a matter of fact, she said to herself, she wanted no help. She was not delicate or very young, like Rose, but a full-grown woman, able for anything, worthy of the confidence that had been placed in her. Nevertheless, there had been a moment, when Heathcote had put out his arm to support her at the side of the grave, when the sense of Cosmo's absence had been almost more than she could bear, and his excuse had not seemed so sufficient as before. She had rejected the proffered support. She had walked firmly away, proving to all beholders that she was able to do all that she had to do, and to bear all that she had to bear: but nevertheless the pang and chill of this moment had shaken Anne's moral being. She had read in Heathcote's eyes some reflection of the indignant question, 'Where is *that* fellow?' She had discerned it in Charley Ashley's every look and gesture—and there had been a dull anticipation and echo

of their sentiments in her heart. She had, as it were, struck against it, and her strength and her nerves were shaken by the encounter. The after thrill of this, still going through and through her, had made her almost indifferent to the shock given by the reading of the will. She had not cared the least about that. She had been dulled to it, and was past feeling it—though it was not in the least what she had expected, and had so much novelty and individuality of vengeance in it as to have given a special blow had she been able to receive it. Even now when her intelligence had fully taken it in, her heart was still untouched by it—*Un chiodo caccia un' altro*. But she had slowly got the better of the former shock. She had re-read Cosmo's letters, of which she received one every day, and had again come to see that his conduct was actuated by the very noblest motives. Then had come Rose's visit and all those questionings, and once more Anne had felt as if she had run against some one in the dark, and had been shaken by the shock. She sat trying to recover herself, trembling and incapable for a long time, before she could go and finish her letter. And yet there was much in that letter that she was anxious Cosmo should know.

While all this was going on upstairs, the two gentlemen were sitting over their dinner, with still a little excitement, a little gloom hovering over them, but on the whole comfortable, returning to their usual ways of thinking and usual calm of mind. Even to those most intimately concerned, death is one of the things to which the human mind most easily accustoms itself. Mr. Loseby was more new than Heathcote was to the aspect of the house, from which for the time all its usual inhabitants and appearances had gone. He said 'Poor Mountford!' two or three times in the course of dinner, and stopped to give an account of the claret on which

the late master of the house had much prided himself. 'And very good it is,' Mr. Loseby said. 'I suppose, unless the widow reserves it for her own use—and I don't believe she knows it from Gladstone claret at 12s. a dozen—there will be a sale.' This intruded a subject which was even more interesting than the will and all that must flow from it. 'What do you intend to do?'

Now Heathcote Mountford was not very happy, any more than the other members of the household. He had gone through a disappointment too. Heathcote had but one person in the world who had been of any importance in his past life, and that was his young brother Edward, now at Sandhurst. It had been settled that Edward and a number of his comrades should come to Mount for the dance, but when Heathcote had signified his wish, after all this was over, that Edward should come for the funeral, the young man had refused. 'Why should I? You will all be as dull as ditch-water; and I never knew our kinsman as you call him. You are dismal by nature, Heathcote, old boy,' the young man had said, 'but not I—why should I come to be another mute? Can't you find enough without me?' Edward, who was very easily moved when his own concerns were in question, was as obstinate as the rest of the Mountfords as to affairs which did not concern himself. He paid no attention to his brother's plea for a little personal consolation. And Heathcote, who regarded the young fellow as a father regards his spoiled child, was disappointed. To be sure, he represented to himself, Edward too had been disappointed; he had lost his ball, which was a thing of importance to him, and the settlement of his affairs, for which he had been looking with such confidence, was now indefinitely postponed. Edward had not been an easy boy to manage; he had not been a very good boy. He had been delicate and

wayward and spoiled—spoiled as much by the elder brother who was thoroughly aware how wrong it was, as by the mother who had been foolish about Edward, and had died when he was still so young that spoiling did not matter much. Heathcote had carried the process on, he had vowed to himself that, so far as was possible, the delicate boy should not miss his mother's tenderness; and he had kept his word, and ruined the boy. Edward had got everything he wanted from his brother, so long as he wanted only innocent things; and afterwards he had got for himself, and insisted on getting, things that were not so innocent; and the result was that, though still only twenty, he was deeply in debt. It was for this that Heathcote had made up his mind to sacrifice the succession to Mount. Sacrifice—it was not a sacrifice; he cared nothing for Mount, and Edward cared less than nothing. Even afterwards, when he had begun to look upon Mount with other eyes, he had persevered in his intention to sacrifice it; but now all that had come to an end. Whether he would or not, Heathcote Mountford had become the possessor of Mount, and Edward's debts were very far from being paid. In these circumstances Heathcote felt it specially hard upon him that his brother did not come to him, to be with him during this crisis. It was natural; he did not blame Edward; and yet he felt it almost as a woman might have felt it. This threw a gloom over him almost more than the legitimate gloom, which, to be sure, Heathcote by this time had recovered from. It was not in nature that he could have felt it very deeply after the first shock. His own vexations poured back upon his mind, when Mr. Loseby said, 'What do you intend to do?'

'You will say what have I to do with that?' the old lawyer said. 'And yet, if you will think, I have to do with it more or less. We have to get the

family out on our side. It's early days—but if you should wish an early settlement——'

'I don't mind if it is never settled,' said Heathcote; 'what should I do with this great place? It would take all my income to keep it up. If they like to stay, they are very welcome. I care nothing about it. Poor St. John had a handsome income from other sources. He was able to keep it up.'

'Good Lord, Mr. Heathcote!' said the lawyer, 'why didn't you come a year ago? A young man should not neglect his relations; it always turns out badly. If you had come here a year ago, in the natural course of events, I could have laid a thousand pounds upon it that you and Anne would have taken a fancy to each other. You seem to me exactly cut out for each other—the same ways, a little resemblance even in looks——.'

'You pay me too great a compliment,' said Heathcote, with an uneasy laugh, colouring in spite of himself; 'and you must let me say that my cousin's name is sacred, and that, old friend as you are, you ought not to discuss her so.'

'I—oughtn't to talk of Anne? Why, she has sat upon my knee,' said Mr. Loseby. 'Ah! why didn't you come a year ago? I don't say now that if it was to your mind to make yourself comfortable as poor Mountford did, in the same way, there's still the occasion handy. No, I can't say that,' said the old lawyer, 'I am too sick of the whole concern. Anne treated like that, and Rose, little Rose, that bit of a girl!—However,' he said, recovering himself, 'I ought to remember that after all you can't take the same interest in them as I do, and that we were talking of your own concerns.'

'I take a great interest in my cousins,' said Heathcote gravely. 'Do you know I believe poor St. John meant to buy my interest, to accept my proposal, and leave Mount to his eldest daughter.'

‘No; you don’t think so? Well, that might have been a way out of it—that might have been a way out of it—now that you recall it to me the same thought struck myself; at least I thought he would take advantage of that to make a new settlement, after he had taken his fling and relieved his mind with this one. Ah, poor man, he never calculated on the uncertainty of life—he never thought of that rabbit-hole. God help us, what a thing life is! at the mercy of any rolling stone, and any falling branch, of a poor little rabbit’s burrowing, or even a glass of water. And what a thing is man! as Hamlet says; it’s enough to make anyone moralise: but we never take a bit of warning by it—never a bit. And so you really think he meant to take Mount off your hands and settle it on Anne? I don’t think he had gone so far as that—but I’ll tell you what we’ll do, we’ll tell her so, and that will make her happy. She’s not like other people, she is all wrong here,’ said Mr. Loseby, laughing, with the tears in his eyes, and tapping his forehead. ‘She has a bee in her bonnet, as the Scotch say. She is a fool, that is what Anne is—she will be as pleased as if he had left her a kingdom. The worst thing of it all to that girl is, that her father has made himself look like a tyrant and a knave—which he wasn’t, you know—he wasn’t, poor Mountford! though he has done his best to make himself appear so. Once give her something to build up his character again upon, some ground, it doesn’t matter how fanciful it is, and she’ll be happy. She won’t mind her own loss, bless you,’ said the old lawyer, half crying, ‘she is such a fool!’

‘Mr. Loseby,’ said Heathcote with an emotion which surprised him, ‘I think you are giving my cousin Anne the most beautiful character that ever was.’

‘Sir,’ cried Mr. Loseby, not ashamed to dry his

eyes, 'whoever said anything different? Did you ever hear anything different? As long as I have known the world I have never known but one Anne Mountford. Oh, Mr. Heathcote, Mr. Heathcote,' he added, his voice turning into tremulous laughter, 'what a thousand pities that you did not make your appearance a year before!'

Heathcote got up from his chair with a start, and walked about the room in a nervous impatience, for which he could give no reason to himself. Was it that he, too, wished he had come to Mount a year sooner? He left the old man to finish his wine, and roamed about, now pausing a moment with his back to the fire, now extending his walk into the dark corners. He had lit his cigarette, which furnished him with an excuse—but he was not thinking of his cigarette. What he was thinking was—What the devil did that fellow mean by staying away now? Why didn't he come and stand by her like a man? What sort of a pitiful cur was he that he didn't come, now he was free to do it, and stand by her like a man? He disposed of Charley Ashley's mild plea with still greater impatience. Perhaps she had forbidden him to come. 'Would I have been kept away by any forbidding?' Heathcote said to himself without knowing it. Then he came back from the corners in which such suggestions lay, feeling uneasy, feeling wroth and uncomfortable, and took his stand again before the fire. 'Perhaps you will give me a little advice about the money I wanted,' he said to Mr. Loseby. This was safer on the whole than suffering himself to stray into foolish fancies as to what he would have done, or would not have done, supposing an impossible case—supposing he had made his appearance a year sooner; before there was any complication of any unsatisfactory 'fellow' with the image of his cousin Anne.

CHAPTER XXII.

SOPHISTRY.

It is not to be supposed that the events which had moved so deeply the household at Mount, and all its connections, should have passed lightly over the one other person who, of all to whom the Mountfords were familiar, could alone feel himself a principal in the important matters involved. Douglas had looked on from a distance, keeping himself out of all the immediate complications, but not the less had he looked on with a beating heart, more anxious than it is possible to say, and, though still quiescent, never less than on the verge of personal action, and never clear that it would not have been wisest for him to plunge into the midst of it from the first. His position had not been easy, nor his mind composed, from the beginning. When he had heard of Mr. Mountford's death his agitation was great. He had not become indifferent to Anne. The thought that she was in trouble, and he not near her, was no pleasant thought. All the first evening, after he had received Charley Ashley's telegram, he had spent in a prolonged argument with himself. He knew from Anne that something had been done, though he did not know what; that, according to her father's own words, the property had been taken from her and given to her sister. She had told him what her father said, that it was understood between them that this transfer was to be made, and that she had no longer any interest in the fortune which had once been so certainly considered hers. Cosmo had not admired the ease with which she spoke on this question. He had gnashed his teeth at Anne's unworldliness, at her calm consent to her father's arrangements, and ready making up of the quarrel

with him. She was his love, his dearest, in all truth the one woman in the world who had captivated his affections, and made him feel that he had no longer any choice, any preference, that did not point to her; but he had acted like a fool all the same, he thought. In some minds, perhaps in most minds, this conviction can exist without in the least affecting the reality of the love which lies behind. He loved Anne, but his love did not make him think that everything she did was well done. She had behaved like a fool. Old Mr. Loseby said the same thing, but he said it with glistening eyes, and with an appreciation of the folly and its character such as Cosmo was altogether incapable of.

Nevertheless, Anne's lover did not feel his love materially lessened by this conviction. He gnashed his teeth at it, thinking, 'Had I but been there!' though he knew very well that, had he been there, he could have done nothing to change it. But one thing he could do: when she was his wife he could put a stop to such follies. There should be none of this ridiculous magnanimity, this still more ridiculous indifference, then. In writing to her he had felt that it was difficult to keep all vestige of his disapproval out of his letters, but he had managed pretty nearly to do so: feeling wisely that it was useless to preach to her on such a subject, that only his own constant guidance and example, or, better still, his personal conduct of her affairs, could bring real good sense into them. He had been anxious enough while this was going on, not seeing what was to come, feeling only certain that, love as he might, he could no more marry his love without a penny than he could make himself Lord Chief Justice. It was out of the question: in his position marriage was difficult in the best of circumstances; but to marry a wife without a fortune of her own,

without enough to keep her comfortable, was simply folly not to be thought of. Anne's dreams of romantic toil, of the enthusiasm of hard work into which a man might rush for the sake of a woman he loved, and of the heroic life the two could lead, helping each other on to fame and fortune at the end, were to him as silly as a nursery tale. Men who made their own way like that, overcoming every obstacle and forcing their way to the heights of ambition, were men who did it by temperament, not by love, or for any sentimental motive. Cosmo knew that he was not the sort of man to venture on such a madness. His wife must have enough to provide for her own comfort, to keep her as she had been accustomed to be kept, or else he could have no wife at all.

This had given him enough to think of from the very beginning of the engagement, as has been already shown. His part was harder than Anne's, for she had fanciful ups and downs as was natural to her, and if she sometimes was depressed would be next moment up in the clouds, exulting in some visionary blessedness, dreaming out some love in a cottage or still more ludicrous love in chambers, which his sterner reason never allowed to be possible, not for an hour; therefore his was the hardest burden of the two. For he was not content to part with her, nor so much as to think of parting with her; and yet, with all his ingenuity, he could not see how, if her father did not relent, it could be done. And the worst thing now was that the father was beyond all power of relenting—that he was dead, absolutely dead, allowed to depart out of this world having done his worst. Not one of the family, not one of Mr. Mountford's dependents, was more stunned by the news than Cosmo. Dead! he read over the telegram again and again—he could not believe his eyes—it seemed impossible that such a

piece of wickedness could have been accomplished; he felt indignant and furious at everybody concerned, at Mr. Mountford for dying, at God for permitting it. A man who had made such a mistake, and to whom it was absolutely indispensable that he should be allowed time to repent of his mistake and amend it—and instead of this he had died—he had been permitted to die.

The news threw Cosmo into a commotion of mind which it is impossible to describe. At one period of the evening he had thrown some things into a bag, ready to start, as Ashley expected him to do; then he took another thought. If he identified himself with everything that was being done now, how could he ever withdraw after, how postpone ulterior proceedings? This, however, is a brutal way of stating even the very first objection that occurred to Cosmo. Sophistry would be a poor art if it only gave an over-favourable view of a man's actions and motives to the outside world, and left himself unconvinced and undeceived. His was of a much superior kind. It did a great deal more for him. When its underground industry was once in full action it bewildered himself. It was when he was actually closing his bag, actually counting out the contents of his purse to see if he had enough for the journey, that this other line of reasoning struck him. If he thus rushed to Mount to take his place by Anne's side, and yet was not prepared (and he knew he was not prepared) to urge, nay, almost force him-self upon Anne's immediate acceptance as her husband, would he not be doing a wrong to Anne? He would compromise her; he would be holding her up to the world as the betrothed of a poor man, a man not so well off as to be able to claim her, yet holding her bound. He paused, really feeling this to throw a new light upon the subject. Would it be acting honourably by Anne?

Would it, in her interest, be the right thing to do?

This, however, was not all or half the mental process he had to go through. He paused for her sake; yet not in this way could the reason of his hesitation be made clear to her. She would not mind being 'compromised.' She would not insist upon the fulfilment of their engagement. He had to think of some other reason to prove to her that it was better he should stay away. He made out his case for her, gradually, at more cost of thought than the plea which had convinced himself; but at the end it satisfied him as full of very cogent and effective reasoning. The whole matter opened up before him as he pondered it. He began to ask himself, to ask her, how he could, as a man of honour, hurry to Mount as soon as the breath was out of the body of the master of the house who had rejected and sent him away? How could he thrust himself into Mr. Mountford's presence as soon as he was dead and incapable of resenting it—he, who when living would have refused to admit him, would have had nothing to say to him? He put back his money into his purse, and slowly undid his bag and threw out his linen as these thoughts arose and shaped themselves in his mind. In either point of view it would be impossible to do it; in either point of view manly self-denial, honour, and consideration for all parties required that in this emergency he should not think of what was pleasant either to her or himself. It was a crisis too important for the mere action of instinctive feelings. Of course he would like to be with her—of course she would like to have him by her. But here was something more than what they would like—a world of things to be considered. To say that Cosmo, deep down at the bottom of his heart, was not aware that there might be another larger, simpler mode of considering the question

which would sweep all these intellectual cobwebs away and carry him off in a moment to Anne's side, to stand by her in defiance of all prudential motives, would be untrue. It is the curse of sophistry that this sense of something better, this consciousness of a fundamental flaw in its arguments, is seldom quite obliterated; but at the same time it was far more in accordance with his nature to act according to the more elaborate, and not according to the simpler system. He satisfied himself, if not completely, yet sufficiently to reconcile himself to what he was doing; and he satisfied Anne so far at least as her first response, her first apprehension was concerned. 'Dear Cosmo, you are right, you are right, you are more than right, as you always are,' she had said with a kind of enthusiasm, in her first letter. 'They say that women have more delicate perceptions, but that only shows how little people know. I see in a moment the truth and the wisdom and the fine honour of what you say. I am capable of understanding it at least, but I feel how far you go beyond me in delicacy of feeling as well as in other things. No, no! you must not come; respect for my dear father forbids it, although I cannot but hope and feel certain that my father himself knows better now.' This had been her first reply to his explanation; and he had been satisfied then that what he had done, and the reasons he had given, were in all senses the best.

It was now, however, the day after Mr. Mountford's funeral, and everything had progressed beyond that event. Till it is over, the dead is still the first person to be considered, and all things refer to him as to one who is the centre of every thought. But when the earth has closed over his head then an inevitable change occurs. He is left there where he lies--be he the most important, the most cherished and beloved--and other interests push in and take

the first place. Cosmo sat in his chambers on the evening of that day, and read his letters with a distinct consciousness of this difference, though he himself had taken no immediate share in the excitements of the dying and the burial. There was a long, very long letter from Anne, and a shorter one from Charley Ashley, which he read first with a slight sensation of alarm, notwithstanding his anxiety to hear about the will ; for Cosmo could not but feel, although he was satisfied himself with the reasons for his conduct, and though Anne was satisfied, that such a rude simpleton as the Curate might possibly take a different view. He held Anne's letter in his hand while he read the other. Charley was very brief. He was not much of a correspondent in any case.

‘We got over the funeral well on the whole,’ Charley wrote. ‘The others only went to the church, but she followed her father to the grave as you would expect. At one moment I thought she would break down ; and then I confess that I felt, in your place, scarcely her own express command could have made up to me for being absent at such a time. The reading of the will was still more trying, if possible—at least I should have thought so. But she behaved like—herself—I can’t say anything more. I thought you would like to have a separate account, as, no doubt, she will make as light of all she has to go through as possible. Only on this point you ought not altogether to take her own word. She has acknowledged that she will have a great deal to bear. She wants support, whatever she may say.’

A slight smile went over Cosmo's face as he put down this note. It was not a very comfortable smile. A man does not like even an imaginary tone of contempt in another man's voice. And Charley Ashley was his own retainer, his dog, so to speak. To be

judged by him was a novel and not a pleasant sensation. A year ago Cosmo could have felt certain that Charley would find everything he did right; he would have believed in his friend's inscrutable motives, even if he could not understand them. But now there was a change. It was not only the hopeless rivalry which Charley himself felt to be hopeless, and which had never stood for a moment in Cosmo's way, but it was the instinct of true affection in the good fellow's heart which made a severe critic, a judge incorruptible, of Charley. Douglas did not think very much of Charley's opinion or approval; but to feel it withdrawn from him, to detect a doubt, and even suspicion in his faithful adherent's words, gave him a sting. Then he read the long letter in which Anne had poured forth all her heart; there were revelations in it also. It had been interrupted by Rose's matter-of-fact questions. Darts of vulgar misapprehension, of commonplace incapacity to understand those fine motives of Cosmo's which to herself were so eloquent, had come across the current of her words. Anne had not been aware of the risings and fallings of sentiment with which she wrote. She had known that by turns her heart in her bosom felt, as she had herself described it, 'like lead.' She had been aware that now and then there had seemed no sort of comfort nor lightening of the sky wherever she looked, even when she looked to him, and endeavoured to think of that 'falling back upon' him to support her, which had seemed the happiest image of their mutual relations a few days ago. But she had not been aware of the breaks in her letter, following these fluctuations of sentiment, of how she had flagged and shown her discouragement, and sometimes permitted to be audible a breathing, not of complaint, not of reproach, but of something which was neither, yet included both—a sort of sigh of loneliness.

‘My heart almost failed me when all was over, she wrote; ‘I think I must have shown it in my looks, for our cousin, Heathcote Mountford, held out his arm to me. It was not his arm I wanted, Cosmo, you know. Oh, how strange and how sad it is that just when we want support most, hard life has so altered everything that we cannot have it!’ And then, again, after giving him the fullest details of the will: ‘I told you before that the thought of being set aside—of being second where I had always been first—was more hard to me than I could have believed possible; and you, who are always ready to think the best of me, said that it was natural, that I could not have been expected to feel otherwise. I must tell you now, however, in my own defence, that I did not feel at all like this to-day; I never imagined, though I have thought so often on the subject, that it would have been possible to set me aside so completely as has been done. You understand that I have nothing (except what came to me from old Uncle Ben), nothing—except indeed a sort of allowance like a schoolmistress for taking care of Rose, which will only last three years. But, Cosmo, if you will believe me, I never thought of it; my heart did not sink in the least. I did not seem to care that it had all gone away from me, or that Rose had been set in my place, or that my father—(poor papa—how he must have felt it at the last!) should have been so unjust. They were all made of no account, as if they were the most trifling things in the world by—something else. I owe that to you too: and you must understand, dear Cosmo, you *must* understand that I feel you must have thought of this, and more or less done it on purpose, for my sake. I cared nothing, nothing, for all the loss and downfall, because there just gleamed upon me a possibility—no, not a possibility—a fancy, an imagination, of how different it would be if I

had to face not the loss of fortune, but the loss of love, and companionship, and support. I cried out to myself, What would it all matter in comparison with that? Thank God that it is money that has been taken from me, not *that*. Feeling myself just for that moment, and for good reason, alone, made me realise to the very bottom of my heart what it would be to be really alone—to have no one to fall back upon, no Cosmo, no world of my own where I can enter in and be above all the world. So you see this little bitter has been sweet, it has been medicine for all my other weaknesses. Through this I rose altogether superior to everything that was sordid. I was astonished at myself. Making believe not to care and not caring are two different things, and this time I attained real indifference, thanks to you.'

This was the passage that affected him most; there were others in which there were slighter references of the same kind, showing that Anne had already tasted the forlorn consciousness of what it was to be alone. It was not a complaint, as will be seen: it was indeed quite the opposite of a complaint; but it gave Cosmo a chill of alarm, a sensation which it would be very difficult to describe. Nor was it a threat on Anne's part—yet he was alarmed; he grew pale and chilly in spite of himself. When he read Anne's letter he took up Charley's again, and ran over that. If he did not want to marry on nothing, and have a family to provide for before he had enough for himself, still less did he wish anyone to regard him as the hero of a broken engagement, a domestic traitor. He was not bad nor treacherous, nor had he any pleasure in the possibility of breaking a heart. What he wanted was, first, to find in the woman he loved 'a lady richly left' like Portia, bringing with her all the natural provisions for a beautiful home which she

would grace and give charm to ; second, if the first should not prove possible, patience to wait, and make no fuss, and see what would turn up. But to be supposed to have behaved badly to a lady, to be set down as drawing back, or holding off, or any of the mild phrases which imply desertion, was terrible to him. This Cosmo could not bear. He did not want to lose or even to risk Anne. And to have her think badly of him, lose the respect, not to say the love, which she felt for him, was a danger that made the hair stand upright on his head. He did not wish even to lose Charley Ashley's regard, and become a mean and discredited person in the Curate's eyes : how much more in Anne's, whom he loved ! A panic took possession of Cosmo. A dishonourable lover, a betrayer, was as much an anachronism as a cruel father ; it was a thing out of date. Men of his stamp broke no vows. They might be disinclined to heroic measures generally, and above all to the uncomfortable heroism of dragging down a woman into poverty, taking advantage of her inexperience, and marrying in the face of every suggestion of prudence. But to desert her because she had lost her fortune, to cry off as soon as it became evident that she was no longer a good match—this, whatever the vulgar imagination may think, is what a young man on his promotion, like Cosmo Douglas, could not venture to do. He was horrified by the very notion. In all questions of marriage there is of course a possibility that it may all come to nothing, that 'circumstances may arise'—that incompatibilities may be discovered—even that a mutual sense of what is prudent may cause an absolute breach. Such things are to be heard of every day in society. But for a man, especially one who is a nobody, to 'behave badly' to a lady—that is what cannot be. If the mere suggestion of such a thing got out, it would be nnendurable. And Cosmo knew that everybody was

ready to report every rumour, to put on record every incident of such a story. At the same time, the great crisis being over, there need be no longer, he said to himself, any idea of compromising Anne. Perhaps the ground on which he framed his new resolution was less solid than that on which he had framed the last. But, according to his new light, the emergency was pressing, and there was no time to lose.

That evening accordingly, the linen which had been put back into his drawers was replaced in the bag, and the contents of his purse reinvestigated. He sent a telegram to Charley Ashley, which filled that good fellow with excitement, compunction, and perhaps a touch of disappointment, and left London by the night train. It brought him to the rectory uncomfortably early; but still there was no other so convenient which entailed so little loss of time, and Cosmo felt the advantage of making it apparent that he had come hurriedly and had little time to spare. He arrived while it was still dark on the wintry, foggy, chill morning. Could any man do more to show the fervent reality of his passion? He had stayed away as long as Anne was filling a kind of official position, so long as she was the object of general observation. Now, when she had no longer any sort of artificial claim upon her, or necessity for exerting herself, here he was at her command.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HEATHCOTE'S PROPOSAL.

It was a new world upon which Anne rose that day. The excitement was over, the gloomy details of business drawing to completion, and the new circumstances of the family life remained to be settled by

the family themselves. It was still early when Anne came downstairs, and took her way to the library in which Mr. Loseby was sitting. He was at her father's table, almost in the same spot where Mr. Mountford, for as long as she could remember, had done his business, or made believe to do it. This startled her a little; but it was time to resist these overwhelming associations, and address herself, she felt, to the business in hand. She came up to him quickly, giving herself no time to think. 'Mr. Loseby, you must instruct me what are my duties,' she said.

Heathcote Mountford was at the other end of the room, idly looking through the books, and she had not seen him, but he was unconscious of this. By degrees he had come to know all about Anne, to feel a difference in the atmosphere when she came in, to see her whenever she appeared as if with eyes in the back of his head.

'Your duties, my dear child?' Mr. Loseby said, pushing up his spectacles on his forehead. 'Sit down there in front of me and let us talk. It does one good to look at you, Anne.'

'You were always very kind,' she said gratefully. 'But you must not spoil me now, for if you do I shall cry, and all my morning's work will come to an end. Mamma is coming downstairs to-day, and all is to be as--it can never be again,' said Anne, with an abrupt interruption of herself. 'But in the meantime it is very needful for me to know what I am to do. I want you to tell me while we are safe--while we are alone.'

'My dear Anne,' said the old lawyer, 'my dear Anne!' and the tears came to his eyes. 'I wish I were everything that I can't be--a fairy prince or a romantic hero--for your sake.'

'I like you a great deal better as Mr. Loseby than if you were a fairy prince.'

‘I dare say that is true; but in the one case I might have delivered you, and in the other I can’t. Do! I don’t know what you have got to do.’

‘Somebody must,’ said Anne. ‘Tell me, please. Am I the guardian, or what does it mean? In Trust! It might be a great deal, or it might not be much. I want to do my duty, Mr. Loseby.’

‘That I am sure you will do, whatever happens. You will have to administer the whole, and watch over the money, and look out for the investments. It is the most extraordinary office for you: but we will not say anything about that.’

‘No: but I do not think it is such an extraordinary office. If the money had been mine, I should have had it to do naturally, and of course I shall do it with all the more care when it is for Rose. The pity is that I don’t know anything about it,’ said Anne, gravely. ‘But I suppose there are books on the subject, books about money and how to manage it. You must tell me how to learn my new profession,’ she added with a smile. ‘It is a curious thing all at once to wake up and find that one has a trade.’

‘I don’t see how you can call it a trade.’

‘Oh, yes, Mr. Loseby, and I am to have 500*l.* a-year of pay—I shall not be worth half so much. When I was young,’ said Anne, with the serene consciousness of maturity, ‘it was one of my fancies to learn something that I could live by. I am afraid I thought of quite little pettifogging businesses—little bits of art-work or such like. I shall be a kind of land-steward with a little of a stock-broker in me, now.’

‘Yes, something of that sort,’ he said, humouring her, looking at her with a smile.

‘Curious,’ said Anne, with a gleam of laughter getting into her eyes, ‘I think I shall like it too; it ought to be amusing—it ought to have an interest—

and you know everybody says that what we girls want is an interest in our lives.'

'You have never wanted an interest in your life.'

'No, I do not think I have; but you must not look so sorry—I am not sorry for myself. What does it matter after all?' said Anne, raising her head with that lofty visionary defiance of all evil. 'There are things which one could not consent to lose—which it really breaks one's heart to lose—which would need to be torn and wrenched out of one: you know, Mr. Loseby?—but not money; how different when it is only money! The mere idea that you might lose the one makes you feel what loss would be, makes you contemptuous of the other.'

'I know?—do you think I know?—Indeed, my dear, I cannot tell,' said Mr. Loseby, shaking his head. 'If I lost what I have, I should not find it at all easy to console myself. I don't think I should be contemptuous or indifferent if all my living were to go.'

'Ah!' she cried, with a sudden light of compunction and pity in her eyes, 'but that is because you—— Oh, forgive me!' with a sudden perception of what she was saying.

'That is because I have not much else to lose?' said the old lawyer. 'Don't be sorry for saying it, it is true. I lost all I had in that way, my dear, as you know, many many years ago. Life, to be sure, has changed very much since then, but I am not unhappy. I have learnt to be content; and it would make a great difference to me if I lost what I have to live upon. Anne, I have got something to tell you which I think will make you happier.'

She looked at him eagerly with her lips apart, her eyes full of beseeching earnestness. 'It is about your father, Anne.'

Her countenance changed a little, but kept its

eagerness. She had not expected anything to make her happier from that quarter; but she was almost more anxious than before to hear what it was.

‘Your cousin has been telling me—you heard his proposal about the entail, which, alas! no time was left us to discuss?—he thinks from what your father said to him,’ said the lawyer, leaning across the table and putting his hand upon hers, ‘that he meant to have arranged this according to Heathcote Mountford’s wishes, and to have settled Mount on you.’

Anne could not speak at first. The tears that had been gathering in her eyes overflowed and fell in a warm shower upon Mr. Loseby’s hand. ‘My cousin Heathcote told you this?’ she said, half sobbing, after a pause.

‘Yes, Anne. I thought it would please you to know.’

‘Please me!’ she made a little pause again, sobbing and smiling. Then she clasped his old hand in both hers with sudden enthusiasm. ‘It makes me perfectly happy!’ she cried: ‘nothing, nothing troubles me any more.’

Then, with natural feminine instinct, she wanted to hear every detail from him of the distinct conversation which she immediately concluded to have taken place between her father and her cousin. Though no one was more ready to jump to conclusions, Anne became as matter-of-fact as Rose herself in her eagerness to know everything that had taken place. The old lawyer did not feel himself able to cope with her questions. ‘I was not present,’ he said; ‘but your cousin himself is here, and he will tell you. Yes, there he is, looking at the books. I am going to fetch some papers I left in my bedroom. Mr. Heathcote, will you come and explain it all while I am away?’

He chuckled to himself with satisfaction as he

left them together: but after all what was the use? 'Good Lord,' he cried to himself, 'why *couldn't* the fellow have come a year ago?' To see how Providence seems to take a pleasure in making the best of plans impracticable! It was inconceivable that nobody had sense enough ever to have thought of that plan before.

But when Anne found herself face to face with Heathcote Mountford, and suddenly discovered that he had been present all the time, she did not feel the same disposition to pursue her inquiries. She had even a feeling that she had committed herself, though she could scarcely tell how. She rose up from her seat with a faint smile, mastering her tears and excitement. 'Thank you for telling Mr. Loseby what has made me so happy,' she said. Then added, 'Indeed, it was more for others than myself. I knew all the time my father had not meant to wrong anyone; no, no, he never was unjust in his life; but others, strangers, like yourself, how were you to know?'

'I am sure this was what he meant,' Heathcote said, putting much more fervour into the asseveration than it would have required had it been as certain as he said. Anne was chilled a little by his very warmth, but she would not admit this.

'I was very certain of it always,' she said, 'though I did not know how he meant it to be. But now, Mr. Heathcote, thank you, thank you with all my heart! you have set that matter to rest.'

Was it really good for her to think that the matter was set at rest, that there never had been any doubt about it, that nothing but honour, and justice, and love towards her had ever been in her father's thoughts? No doubt she would set up some theory of the same kind to explain, with the same certainty, the sluggishness of the other, of the fellow who, having a right to support her, had left her to stand

alone in her trouble. This brought a warm glow of anger into Heathcote's veins; but he could only show it by a little impatience expressed with a laugh over a small grievance of his own.

'You said Cousin Heathcote just now. I think, after all we have seen and felt together, that a title at least as familiar as that might be mine.'

'Surely,' she said, with so friendly a smile, that Heathcote felt himself ridiculously touched. Why this girl should with a smile make him feel disposed to weep, if that were possible to a man of his age, he could not tell. It was too absurd, but perhaps it was because of the strange position in which she herself stood, and the way in which she occupied it, declaring herself happy in her loss, yet speaking with such bated breath of the other loss which she had discovered to be possible, and which, in being possible, had taken all feeling about her fortune away from her. A woman, standing thus alone among all the storms, so young, so brave, so magnanimous, touches a man's heart in spite of himself. This was how he explained it. As he looked at her, he found it difficult to keep the moisture out of his eyes.

'I want to speak to you about business,' he said. 'Mr. Loseby is not the only instructor in that art. Will you tell me—don't think I am impertinent: where you intend—where you wish—to live?'

A flush came upon Anne's face. She thought he wanted possession of his own house, which was so natural. 'We will not stay to trouble you!' she cried. Then, overcoming the little impulse of pride, 'Forgive me, Cousin Heathcote, that was not what you meant, I know. We have not talked of it, we have had no consultation as yet. Except Mount, where I have always lived, one place is the same as another to me.'

But while she said this there was something in Anne's eyes that contradicted her, and he thought

that he could read what it meant. He felt that he knew better than she knew herself, and this gave him zeal in his proposal; though what he wanted was not to further but to hinder the wish which he divined in her heart.

‘If this is the case, why not stay at Mount?’ Heathcote said. ‘Listen to me; it is of no use to me; I am not rich enough to keep it up. This is why I wanted to get rid of it. You love the place and everything about it—whereas it is nothing to me.’

‘Is it so?’ said Anne, with a voice of regret. ‘Mount!—nothing to you?’

‘It was nothing to me, at least till the other day; and to you it is so much. All your associations are connected with it; you were born here, and have all your friends here,’ said Heathcote, unconsciously enlarging upon the claims of the place, as if to press them upon an unwilling hearer. Why should he think she was unwilling to acknowledge her love for her home? And yet Anne felt in her heart that there was divination in what he said.

‘But, Cousin Heathcote, it is yours, not ours. It was our home, but it is no longer so. Don’t you think it would be more hard to have no right to it, and yet stay, than to give it up and go? The happiness of Mount is over,’ she said softly. ‘It is no longer to us the one place in the world.’

‘That is a hard thing to say to me, Anne.’

‘Is it? why so? When you are settled in it, years after this, if you will ask me, I will come to see you, and be quite happy,’ said Anne with a smile; ‘indeed I shall; it is not a mean dislike to see you here. That is the course of nature. We always knew it was to be yours. There is no feeling of wrong, no pain at all in it; but it is no longer *ours*. Don’t you see the difference? I am sure you see it,’ she said.

‘But if your father had carried out his intention——’

‘Do you know,’ said Anne, looking at him with a half wistful, half smiling look, ‘on second thoughts it would perhaps be better not to say anything to mamma or Rose about my father’s intention? They might think it strange. They might say that was no punishment at all. I am very glad to know it for my own comfort, and that you should understand how really just he was; but they might not see it in the same light.’

‘And it has nothing to do with the question,’ said Heathcote, almost roughly; ‘the opportunity for such an arrangement is over. Whether he intended or whether he did not intend it—I cannot give you Mount.’

‘No, no; certainly you cannot give it to me——’

‘At least,’ he cried, carried beyond himself by the excitement of the moment. ‘There was only one way in which I could have given it to you: and that, without ever leaving me the chance, without thinking of any claim I had, you have put out of my power—you have made impossible, Anne!’

She looked at him, her eyes opened wider, her lips dropping apart, with a sort of consternation. then a tinge of warmer colour gradually rose over her face. The almost fierceness of his tone, the aggrieved voice and expression had something half ludicrous in it; but in her surprise this was not visible to Anne. And he saw that he had startled her, which is always satisfactory. She owed him reparation for this, though it was an unintentional wrong. He ended with a severity of indignation which overwhelmed her.

‘It does not seem to me that I was ever thought of, that anyone took me into consideration. I was never allowed to have a chance. Before I came here,

my place, the place I might have claimed, was appropriated. And now I must keep Mount though I do not want it, and you must leave it though you do want it, when our interests might have been one. But no, no, I am mistaken. You do not want it now, though it is your home. You think you will prefer London, because London is——'

'Mr. Heathcote Mountford, I think you forget what you are saying——'

'Don't call me that at least,' he cried; 'don't thrust me away again as a stranger. Yes, I am absurd; I have no right to claim any place or any rights. If I had not been a fool, I should have come here a year, five years ago, as old Loseby says.'

'What is that about old Loseby?' said the lawyer, coming into the room. He was carrying a portfolio in his hands, which, let us hope, he had honestly gone to look for when he left them. Anyhow he carried it ostentatiously as if this had been his natural object in his absence. But the others were too much excited to notice his portfolio or his severely business air. At least Heathcote was excited, who felt that he had evidently made a fool of himself, and had given vent to a bit of ridiculous emotion, quite uncalled for, without any object, and originating he could not tell how. What was the meaning of it, he would have asked himself, but that the fumes of his own words had got into his head. He turned away, quite beyond his own control, when the lawyer appeared, his heart beating, his blood coursing through his veins. How had all this tempest got up in an instant? Did it come from nothing, and mean nothing? or had it been there within him, lying quiescent all this time. He could not answer the question, nor, indeed, for that matter, did he ask it, being much too fully occupied for the moment with the commotion which had thus

suddenly got up like the boiling of a volcano within him, without any will of his own.

And Anne was too much bewildered, too much astonished to say anything. She could not believe her own ears. It seemed to her that her senses must be playing her false, that she could not be seeing aright or hearing aright—or else what did it mean? Mr. Loseby glided in between them with his portfolio, feeling sure they would remark his little artifice and understand his stratagem; but he had succeeded in that stratagem so much better than he thought, that they paid no attention to him at all.

‘What are you saying about old Loseby?’ he asked. ‘It is not civil in the first place, Mr. Heathcote, to call your family man of business old. It is a contumelious expression. I am not sure that it is not actionable. That reminds me that I have never had anything to do with your branch of the family—which, no doubt, is the reason why you take this liberty. I am on the other side——’

‘Do me this service, then, at once,’ said Heathcote, coming back from that agitated little walk with which a man who has been committing himself and showing uncalled-for emotion so often relieves his feelings. ‘Persuade my cousins to gratify me by staying at Mount. I have clearly told you I should not know what to do with it. If they will stay nothing need be changed.’

‘It is a very good idea,’ said Mr. Loseby. ‘I think an excellent idea. They will pay you a rent for it which will be reasonable, which will not be exorbitant.’

‘They shall do nothing of the sort,’ cried Heathcote: ‘rent—between me and——’

‘Yes, between you and Mrs. Mountford, the most reasonable proposal in the world. It is really a thing to be taken into your full consideration, Anne.

Of course you must live somewhere. And there is no place you would like so well.'

Here a guilty flush came upon Anne's face. She stole a furtive glance at Heathcote to see if he were observing her. She did not wish to give him the opportunity of saying 'I told you so,' or convicting her out of her own mouth.

'I think mamma and Rose have some idea—that is, there was some talk—Rose has always wanted masters whom we can't get here. There was an idea of settling in London—for a time——'

He did not turn round, which was merciful. If he had divined her, if he now understood her, he gave no sign at least. This was generous, and touched Anne's heart.

'In London! Now, what on earth would you do in London, country birds like Rose and you? I don't say for a little time in the season, to see the pictures, and hear some music, and that sort of thing; but settling in London, what would you do that for? You would not like it; I feel sure you would not like it. You never could like it, if you tried.'

To this Anne was dumb, making no response. She stood with her eyes cast down, her face flushed and abashed, her two hands clasped together, as much like a confused and naughty child as it was possible for Anne to be. She gave once more an instantaneous, furtive glance from under her downcast eyelids at Heathcote. Would he rejoice over her to see his guess, his impertinent guess, proved true? But Heathcote was taking another agitated turn about the room, to blow off his own excitement, and was not for the moment observant of hers.

After this Mr. Loseby began to impart to Anne real information about the duties which would be required of her, to which she gave what attention she could. But this was not so much as could have

been desired. Her mind was running over with various thoughts of her own, impulses which had come to her from another mind, and new aspects of old questions. She left the library as soon as she could, in order to get back to the shelter of her own room and there think them out. Had Heathcote known how little attention she gave to his own strange, unintentional self-betrayal—if it was indeed a self-betrayal, and not a mere involuntary outbreak of the moment, some nervous impulse or other, incomprehensible to the speaker as to the hearer—he would have been sadly humbled. But, as a matter of fact, Anne scarcely thought of his words at all. He had made some mistake, she felt sure. She had not heard him right, or else she had missed the real meaning of what he said, for that surface meaning was of course impossible. But she did think about the other matter. He had divined her almost more clearly than she had understood herself. When she had decided that to go to London would be the best thing the family could do, she had carefully directed her mind to other motives; to the facilities of getting masters for Rose, and books, and everything that was interesting; to the comfort and ease of life in a place where everything could be provided so easily, where there would be no great household to keep up. She had thought of the cheerfulness of a bright little house near the parks, and all the things there would be to see—the interests on all sides, the means of occupying themselves. But she had not thought—had she thought?—that Cosmo would be at hand, that he would be within reach, that he might be the companion of many expeditions, the sharer of many occupations. Had she secretly been thinking of this all the time? had this been her motive and not the other? Heathcote Mountford had seen through her and had divined it, though she had not known it

herself. She paused now to ask herself with no small emotion, if this were true; and she could not say that it was not true or half true. If it were so, was it not unmaidenly, unwomanly, wrong to go after him, since he did not come to her? She had made up her mind to it without being conscious of that motive: but now the veil was torn from her eyes, and she was aware of the weakness in her own heart. Ought she to go, being now sure that to be near Cosmo was one of her chief objects; or would it be better to remain at Mount as Heathcote's tenant? Anne's heart sank down, down to the lowest depth; but she was a girl who could defy her heart and all her inclinations when need was. She threw herself back as a last resource upon the others who had to be consulted. Though she knew she could turn them as she pleased, yet she proposed to herself to make an oracle of them. According to their response, who knew nothing about it, who would speak according to the chance impression of the moment, so should the decision be

CHAPTER XXIV.

A VISITOR.

THAT evening all things had recommenced to be at Mount as——‘they could never be again,’ as Anne said: that is, the habits of the first week of mourning had been laid aside, the ladies had come downstairs, and appeared at table, and everything returned to its use and wont. Mr. Mountford's place was left vacant at the table. Heathcote would not take it, though he had been assured, with tears, that the family would wish it so to be, and that no one would feel wounded by his assumption of his rights. ‘I will sit where I have always sat if you will let me,’ he said putting himself at Mrs. Mountford's

right hand. Thus he sat between her and Rose, who was pleased by what she thought the preference he showed her. Rose dearly liked to be preferred—and, besides, Heathcote was not to be despised in any way. Grave thoughts of uniting the property had already entered her little head. He was not young, indeed he was distinctly old in Rose's juvenile eyes, but she said to herself that when a man has so much in his favour a trifling matter like age does not count. She was very serious, what her mother called practical, in her ways of thinking: and the importance of uniting the property affected Rose. Therefore she was glad that he seemed to like her best, to choose her side of the table. Anne sat opposite, contemplating them all serenely, meeting Heathcote's eyes without any shyness, which was more than he could boast in respect to her. He scarcely addressed her at all during the time of dinner, and he never, she perceived, broached to her stepmother or sister the question which he had discussed with her with so much vehemence. At dinner Anne felt herself at leisure—she was able to look at him and observe him, as she had never done before. He had a very handsome face, more like the ideal hero of a book than anything that is usually met with in the world. His eyes were large and dark; his nose straight; his hair dark, too, and framing his face as in a picture. 'I do not like handsome men,' Anne said to herself. She smiled when the thought had formed in her mind, smiled at herself. Cosmo was not handsome; he was of no particular colour, and had no very striking features. People said of him that he was gentlemanlike. It was the only thing to say. But here was a face which really was beautiful. Beauty! in a man she said to herself! and felt that she disliked it. But she could not but look at him across the table. She could not lift her eyes without seeing him. His

face was the kind of face that it was natural to suppose should express fine sentiments, high-flown, Anne said to herself, she whom everybody else called high-flown. But he listened with a smile to Rose who was not of that constitution of mind.

After dinner, when the ladies were alone in the drawing-room, Anne made their cousin's proposal known to them: that they should continue to live at Mount, paying him rent according to Mr. Loseby's suggestion. She did not herself wish to accept this proposal—but a kind of opposition was roused in her by the blank manner in which it was listened to. She had been struggling against a guilty sense of her own private inclination to go to London, to be in the same place with her lover—but she did not see why *they* should wish the same thing. There seemed to Anne to be a certain impertinence in any inclination of theirs which should turn the same way. What inducement had they to care for London, or any change of residence? Though they were virtually backing her up, yet she was angry with them for it. 'I thought you would be sure to wish to stay,' she said.

'You see, Anne,' said Mrs. Mountford, with some hesitation, 'it is not now as it was before; when we were all happy together, home was home. But now, after all we have gone through—and things would not be the same as before—your sister wants a change—and so do you——'

'Do not think of me,' said Anne, hastily.

'But it is my duty to think of you, too. Rose has always been delicate, and the winters at Mount are trying, and this year, of course, you would have no variety, no society. I am sure it is very kind of Heathcote: but if we could get a comfortable little house in town—a change,' said Mrs. Mountford, growing bolder, 'would do us all good.'

'Oh, don't let us stay at Mount!' cried Rose.

In the wet, cold winter days it is terrible. I have never liked Mount in winter. Do let us get away now that we can get away. I have never seen anything. Let us go to town till the spring, and then let us go abroad.'

'That is what I should like,' said Mrs. Mountford, meekly. 'Change of air and scene is always recommended. You are very strong, Anne, you don't feel it so much—you could go on for ever; but people that are more delicately organised, people who *feel* things more, can't just settle down after trouble like ours. We ought to move about a little and have thorough change of scene.'

Anne was amazed at herself for the annoyance, the resentment, the resistance to which she felt herself moved. It was simple perversity, she felt, for in her heart she wanted to move, perhaps more than they did—and she had a reason for her wish—but they had none. It was mere wanton desire for change on their part. She was angry, though she saw how foolish it was to be angry. 'It was extremely kind of Heathcote to make such a proposal,' she said.

'I don't say it was not kind, Anne—but he feels that he cannot keep it up. He does not like the idea of leaving the place all dismantled and uninhabited. You may tell him I will leave the furniture; I should not think of taking it away, just at present. I think we should look about us,' said Mrs. Mountford, 'before we settle anywhere; and select a really good place—which Mount would never be,' she added, with a little shaking out of her crape, 'for us, in our changed circumstances. It may be very kind of Heathcote—but I don't see that we can do it. It would be too much to expect.'

And Anne was silenced, not knowing what pleas to bring forward for the defeat of the cause which was her own cause; but she was angry that they

should presume to think so *too*. What was town to them? They had no one in it to make that great wilderness feel like home. They had no inducement that she knew of. She felt reluctant to be happy by such unreasonable means.

Keziah, the little maid to whom Anne had, during the interval since she was last mentioned, imparted a great deal of very energetic advice as to the duty of holding fast to her lover, and taking no thought of interest, had red eyes that night when she came to put her mistress's things away. Anne was very independent. She did not require much actual service. It was Rose who benefited by Keziah's services in this respect. But when she was dismissed by Rose she came into the room where Anne sat writing, and instead of doing her work as usual with noiseless speed, and taking herself away, she hovered about for a long time, poking the fire, arranging things that had no particular need of arranging, and crossing and re-crossing Anne's point of view. She had red eyes, but there was in her little person an air of decision that was but seldom apparent there. This Anne perceived, when, attracted at length by these manœuvres, she put away her writing and looked up. 'Keziah,' she said, 'how are things going? I can't help thinking you have something to say to me to-night.'

'Yes, Miss Anne,' said the girl, very composedly: 'I have got something to say—I wanted you to know, as you've always been so kind and taken an interest—people has the same sort of feelings, I suppose, whether they're quality or whether they're common folks——'

'That is very true, Keziah. I suspect we are all of the same flesh and blood.'

'Don't you laugh at me, Miss Anne. Miss Anne, I would like to tell you as I've made up my mind to-night.'

‘I hope you have made a right decision, Keziah,’ said Anne, with some anxiety, feeling suspicious of the red eyes.

‘Oh, I’m not afraid of its being *right*, Miss Anne. If it wasn’t right,’ said the little girl, with a wan smile, ‘I don’t think as it would be as hard. I’d have settled sooner if it hadn’t been for thinking what Jim would say,’ she added, a tear or two coming to dilate her eyes; ‘it wasn’t for myself. If you do your duty, Miss Anne, you can’t do no more.’

‘Then, Keziah, you have been talked over,’ said Anne, with some indignation, rising up from her desk. ‘Worth has been worrying you, and you have not been able to resist her. Why did you not tell her, as I told you, to come and have it out with me?’

‘I don’t know what good that would have done, Miss Anne. It was me that had to settle after all.’

‘Of course it was you that had to settle. Had it been anyone else I should not have lost all this time, I should have interfered at once. Keziah, do you know what you are doing? A young girl like you, just my age—(but I am not so young, I have had so much to think of, and to go through), to sell herself to an old man.’

‘Miss Anne, I’m not selling myself’ said Keziah, with a little flush of resentment. ‘He hasn’t given me anything, not so much as a ring—I wouldn’t have it of him—I wouldn’t take not a silver thimble, though he’s always teasing—for fear you should say— Whatever anyone may think, they can’t say as I’ve sold myself,’ said Keziah proudly. ‘I wouldn’t take a thing from him, not if it was to save his life.’

‘This is mere playing upon words, Keziah,’ said Anne, towering over the victim in virtuous indignation. ‘Old Saymore is well off and poor Jim has nothing. What do you call that but selling

yourself? But it is not your doing! it is Worth's doing. Why doesn't he marry *her*? It would be a great deal more suitable than marrying you.'

'He don't seem to see that, Miss Anne,' said Keziah with a demure half curtsy: a certain comic sense of the absurdity of marrying the aunt when the niece was by, crept into the profound seriousness of her looks. That anybody should suppose old Saymore would marry Worth gave the girl a melancholy amusement in spite of herself

'She would be far more suitable,' cried Anne in her impetuous way. 'I think I'll speak to them both and set it before them. It would be a thousand times more suitable. But old Saymore is too old even for Worth: what would he be for you?'

Keziah looked at her young mistress with eyes full of very mingled feelings. The possibility of being delivered by the simple expedient of a sudden match got up by the tormentors themselves gave her a half-frightened visionary hope, but it was mixed with a half-offended sentiment of proprietorship which she could scarcely acknowledge: old Saymore belonged to her. She would have liked to get free from the disagreeable necessity of marrying him, but she did not quite like the idea of seeing him married off to somebody else under her very eyes.

'It's more than just that, Miss Anne,' she said, shaking her head. 'All of us in the house are thinking of what is likely to happen, and Mr. Saymore, he says he will never take another place after having been so long here. And he has a good bit of money laid by, Miss Anne,' said Keziah, not without pride. 'And Mr. Goodman, of the "Black Bull" at Huns-ton, he's dead. That's where we're thinking of settling. I know how to keep the books and make up the bills, and mother she would be in the kitchen, and such a fine opening for the boys. I don't know what I shouldn't deserve if I were to set up myself

against all that. And it isn't myself neither,' said Keziah. 'I should be ashamed to make a fuss for me. I have always told you that, Miss Anne. I hope I'm not one as would go against my duty. It's Jim I've always thought upon. Men folks are more wilful than women. They are more used to get their own way. If he was to go to the bad, Miss Anne, and me the cause of it——'

Here Keziah broke down, and wept without any further attempt to restrain her tears.

'I don't understand you,' cried Anne impetuously. 'You pretend to be sorry for him, and this is how you treat him. But leave Jim to take care of himself, Keziah. Let us think of you. This is what I call going to the bad. Poor Jim might take to drinking, perhaps, and ruin himself—but I don't think that is so much going to the bad as to love one man and marry another. That is the worst of sin,' said the girl, with cheeks and eyes both flaming. 'It is treachery, it is falsehood, it is dishonour, to you and to everyone concerned.'

Poor little Keziah quailed before this outburst. She shrank back with a look of pain as if she feared her mistress's wrath would take some tangible form. She cried bitterly, sobbing aloud, 'You've got no call to be angry, Miss Anne. You didn't ought to be angry, Miss Anne. I'm a-going to do my duty; it's nothing but my duty as I'm going to do!'

Anne felt, when the interview was over, that she had in all probability done more harm than good. She had frightened Keziah, and made her cling all the more to the comfort which sprang from a settled resolution, and she had even stimulated that resolve by the prick of opposition which moves the meekest of natures. She had made Keziah feel herself wronged, her sacrifice unappreciated, her duty misconceived, and the girl had fallen back with all the more confidence upon the approval of her (as Anne

thought) worldly-minded aunt, and the consolation of the old bridegroom, who, though he was old, was a great man in the servants' hall—great as the butler and head of the establishment downstairs, and still more great as the prospective landlord of the 'Black Bull' at Hunston. To be the future mistress of such a place was a glory enough to turn a girl's head. Keziah went away crying, and feeling that she had not deserved the cruel 'scolding' administered by Miss Anne. She going to the bad! when she was doing her duty in the highest and most superlative way, and had hanging over her head, almost touching it, the crown of that landlady's cap, with the most becoming ribbons, which ranks like the strawberry leaves of another elevation in the housekeeper's room and the servants' hall.

It was the morning after this that Cosmo arrived. Anne was going downstairs to a morning's work with Mr. Loseby, thoughtful and serious as she always was now; but by this time all the strangeness of her position was over; she had got used to it and even reconciled to it. She had work to do, and a position in the world which was all that one wanted for happiness. Indeed, she was better off, she said to herself, than if she had been in her natural position. In that case, in all probability, she would have had someone else to do for her what she was now to do for Rose, and her occupation would have been gone. She felt that she had passed into the second chapter of life—as if she had married, she said to herself with a passing blush—though so different. She had real work to do in the world, not make-believe, but actual—not a thing she could throw aside if she pleased, or was doing only for amusement. Perhaps it requires a whole life of leisure, and ideas shaped by that exemption from care which so often strikes the generous mind as ignoble, which made her appreciate so highly this

fine burden of real unmistakable work, not done to occupy her time merely, but because it had to be done. She prepared herself for it, not only without pain but with actual pleasure. But on her way down to the library, where Mr. Loseby was waiting her, Anne chanced to cast her eyes out from the end of the corridor across the park. It was the same window to which she had rushed to listen to the cry the night her father died. It had been night then, with a white haze of misty moonlight and great shadows of blackness. But now it was morning, and the red sunshine lighted up the hoar frost on the grass, already pursuing it into corners, melting away the congealed dew upon the herbs and trees. She stood for a moment's meditation, still gazing out without any object, scarcely knowing why. To a thoughtful and musing mind there is a great attraction at a window, which is a kind of opening in the house and in one's being, full of long wistful vistas of inspection into the unseen. But Anne had not been there many minutes before a cry broke from her lips, and her whole aspect changed. Charley Ashley was coming along the road which crossed the park—but not alone. A thrill ran through her from her head to her feet. In a moment her mind went over the whole of the past fortnight's story. Her chill and dumbness of disappointment, which she would not express even to herself, when he did not come; her acquiescence of reason (but still with a chill of the heart) in his explanations; the subdued sense of restraint, and enforced obedience to other rules, not first or only to those of the heart, and the effort with which she had bowed herself: her solitude, her longing for support, her uneasiness every way under the yoke which he had thought it necessary to impose upon himself and her, all this seemed to pass before her view in a moment. She had acquiesced; she had even reasoned herself into satisfaction; but oh!

the glorious gleam of approval with which Anne saw all that she had consented to beforehand in the light of the fact that now he was here ; now he was coming, all reason for his staying away being over—not hurriedly, as if wishing to chase the recollection of her father from her mind, or to grudge him that last pre-eminence in the thoughts of those belonging to him, which is the privilege of every man who dies. Cosmo had fulfilled every reverent duty towards him who was his enemy. He had done what it was most difficult to do. He had kept away till all the rites were accomplished ; and now he was coming ! All was over, not one other observance of affection possible ; the very widow coming out again, thinking (a little) of the set of her cap and planning to go abroad in spring. And now there was no longer any reason why the lover should stay away. If there is one feeling in the world which is divine, it is the sense of full approval of those whom one loves most. To be able with one's whole heart to consent and know that all they have done is well, to approve them not with blindness (though that is the silliest fable) of love, or its short-sightedness, but, on the contrary, with all its enlightenment in the eyes that cannot be content with less than excellence : to look on and see everything and approve—this, and not any personal transport or enjoyment, is heaven. Anne, standing by the window seeing the two figures come in sight, in a moment felt the gates of Paradise open before her, and was swept within them by a silent flood of joy. She approved, making no exception, reserving nothing. As she walked downstairs, her feet did not seem to touch the ground. What a poor, small, ignoble little being she had been not to read him all the time ! but now that the illumination had come, and she saw his conduct from first to last, Anne saw, or thought she saw, that everything was right, everything noble. She approved, and was happy.

She forgot Mr. Loseby and the morning's business, and walked towards the hall with a serene splendour about her, a glory as of the moon and the stars, all beautiful in reflected light.

There was nobody in the hall, and the kind Curate when he came in did nothing but pass through it. 'I suppose I shall find them in the drawing-room?' he said, waving his hand and walking past. Anne accepted the passing greeting gladly. What did she want with Charley? He went through the hall while the other came to her side.

'You wanted me, Anne?'

'Wanted you—oh, how I have wanted you!—there has been so much to do; but I approve, Cosmo—I approve everything you have done. I feel it right that I should have stood alone till now. You help me more in doing my duty, than if you had done all for me. You were right all along, all through—'

'Thank you, my dearest,' he said. 'But, Anne, I see in what you say that there have been moments in which you have not approved. This was what I feared—and it would have been so much easier to do what was pleasant.'

'No—I do not think there were moments—at least not anything more. Cosmo, what do you think of me now, a woman without a penny? I wonder if you approve of me as I approve of you.'

'I think I do more, dear: I admire, though I don't think I could have been so brave myself. If you had not been just the girl you are, I fear I should have said, Throw me over and let us wait.'

'You did say it,' she said in a lower tone; 'that is the only thing of all that I do not like in you.'

'To think you should have undergone such a loss for me!—and I am not worth it—it humbles me,

Anne. I could not believe it was possible. Up to the last minute I felt it could not be.'

'I knew it would be,' she said softly: was not there something else that Cosmo had to say? She waited for half a minute with a certain wistfulness in her eyes. The glory of her approval faded a little—a very little. To be perfect he had to say something more. 'If thou wouldst be perfect!' Was not even the Saviour himself disappointed (though he knew what was in man) when the young ruler whom he loved at first sight did not rise to that height which was opened to him? Anne could not say the same words, but she felt them in her heart. Oh, Cosmo, if thou wouldst be perfect! but he did not see it, or he did not do it at least.

'I cannot understand it yet,' he went on. 'Such injustice, such cruelty—do I pain you, my darling? I cannot help it. If it had been only the postponement of all our hopes, that would have been bad enough: but to take your rights from you arbitrarily, absolutely, without giving you any choice——'

'I would so much rather you did not speak of it, Cosmo. It cannot be mended. I have got to accept it and do the best I can,' she said.

'You take it like an angel, Anne. I knew you would do that: but I am not an angel: and to have all our happiness thrust into the distance, indefinitely, making the heart sick—you must not expect me to take it so easily. If I had been rich indeed—how one longs to be rich sometimes!' he said, almost hurting her with the close clasp of his arm. Every word he said was true; he loved her even with passion, as he understood passion. And if he had been rich, Cosmo would have satisfied that judgment of hers, which once more, in spite of her, was up in the tribunal, watchful, anxious, not able to blind its eyes.

'I do not long to be rich,' she said; 'little will content me.'

‘My dearest!’ he said with tender enthusiasm, with so much love in his looks and tone, so much admiration, almost adoration, that Anne’s heart was put to silence in spite of herself. How is a woman, a girl, to remain uninfluenced by all these signs of attachment? She could not repulse them; she could not say, All this is nothing. If thou would’st be perfect! Her consciousness of something wanting was not put away, but it was subdued, put down, forced into the shade. How could she insist upon what was, indeed, the final test of his attachment? how could she even indicate it? Anne had, in her mind, no project of marriage which would involve the laying aside of all the active practical duties which her father had left as his only legacy to her; but that her lover should take it for granted that her loss postponed all their hopes, was not a thing which, in itself, was pleasant to think of. She could not banish this consciousness from her mind. But in those early moments when Cosmo was so tender, when his love was so evident, how could she hold back and doubt him? It was easier by far to put a stop upon herself, and to silence her indefinite, indefinable dissatisfaction. For in every respect but this Cosmo was perfect. When he presented himself before Mrs. Mountford his demeanour was everything that could be desired. He threw himself into all their arrangements, and asked about their plans with the gentle insistence of one who had a right to know. He promised, nay offered, at once to begin the search for a house, which was the first thing to be done. ‘It will be the pleasantest of duties,’ he said. ‘What a difference to my life! It will be like living by the gates of heaven, to live in the same place with you, to know I may come and see you; or even come and look at the house you are in.’ ‘Certainly.’ Mrs. Mountford said afterwards, ‘Mr. Douglas was very nice. I wonder why dear papa was so prejudiced

against him, for, indeed, nothing could be nicer than the way he talked ; and he will be a great help to us in finding a house.' He stayed the whole day, and his presence made everything go smoothly. The dinner-table was absolutely cheerful with the aid of his talk, his town news, his latest information about everything. He pleased everybody, even down to old Saymore, who had not admired him before. Cosmo had to leave next day, having, as he told them, while the courts were sitting, no possibility of a holiday ; but he went charged with many commissions, and taking the position almost of a member of the family—a son of the house. Anne walked with him to the village to see him go ; and the walk through the park, though everything was postponed, was like a walk through Paradise to both. 'To think that I am going to prepare for your arrival is something more than words can say,' he told her as they parted. 'I cannot understand how I can be so happy.' All this lulled her heart to rest, and filled her mind with sweetness, and did everything that could be done to hoodwink that judgment which Anne herself would so fain have blindfolded and drowned. This she did not quite succeed in doing—but at all events she silenced it, and kept it quiescent. She began to prepare for the removal with great alacrity and pleasure ; indeed, the thought of it cheered them all—all at least except Heathcote Mountford, whose views had been so different, and whose indignation and annoyance, though suppressed, were visible enough. He was the only one who had not liked Cosmo. But then he did not like the family plans, nor their destination, nor anything, Rose said with a little pique. Anne, for her part, avoided Heathcote, and declared to herself that she could not bear him. What right had he to set up a tribunal at which Cosmo was judged ? That she should do it was bad

enough, but a stranger! She knew exactly what Heathcote thought. Was it because she thought so, too, that she divined him, and knew what was in his heart?

CHAPTER XXV.

PACKING UP.

MOUNT was soon turned upside down with all the excitement of packing. It was a relief from the monotony which hangs about a house from which the world is shut out, and where the family life is still circling round one melancholy event. Days look like years in these circumstances; even when the grief is of the deepest those who are left behind must do something to keep the dulled wheels of life in motion, since not even the most truly bereaved can die of grief when they will. But in the case of the Mountfords the affliction was not excessive. Anne, whom her father had wronged, perhaps mourned most of all, not because of more love, but more depth of nature, which could not leave the old so lightly to turn to the new, and which felt more awe and reverence for those mysterious changes which alter the very face of life. Rose cried a great deal during the first few days, and Mrs. Mountford still went on performing little acts of devotion, going to look at her husband's portrait, and thinking of him as a mournful duty; but there was a certain excitement of new existence in both their hearts. So long as he was there they were bound to Mount, and all the old habits of their life—indeed never thought of breaking them, or supposed it possible they could be broken; but now they were free, and their smiles came back involuntarily as they prepared for this exciting removal, the beginning of a new life. Anne's mind was kept in a graver key by many

causes. The nameless and causeless compunctions, remorsees, which move the sensitive spirit in profound and awe-stricken sympathy with the dead, were for her alone in the house. She only tormented herself with thoughts of other possibilities, of things that might have been done and were not done; of words, nay even looks, which, had she but known how near her father was to the unseen world, might have been modified or withheld; and she only followed him, halting, uncertain, to the portals of the unseen existence, as she had followed him to his grave. What was he doing there? a man not heavenly, with qualities that were more suited for the common soil below than the celestial firmament above. It was she only who put these questions, not, perhaps as we have said, that she loved him more, but that she felt more deeply, and everything that happened was of more consequence to her. Besides, she had other causes of gravity. Her position was more serious altogether. Even the new-made widow had a straightforward path before her, lonely yet troubled by no uncertainty— but Anne was walking in darkness, and did not comprehend her lot.

Of all her surroundings the one who was most conscious of this was the Rector, who, getting no satisfaction, as he said, from his son, came out to Mount himself one of those wintry mornings to question Anne in person. ‘What have they settled?’ he had asked confidently, as soon as the Curate returned from the station where he had been seeing his friend off. ‘I don’t think they have settled anything, sir,’ said Charley, turning his back upon his father, not caring to betray more than was needful of his own feelings. ‘They are all going off to London—that is the only thing that seems to be decided.’ ‘God bless my soul!’ cried the Rector—which benediction was the good man’s oath; but that has nothing to do with it. I want to know

what is settled about Anne.' Then poor Charley, out of the excess of his devotion and dissatisfaction, made a stand for his friend. 'You know, sir, what a struggle a young barrister has to do anything,' he said; 'how can they—settle, when all the money is gone?' 'God bless my soul!' the Rector said again; and after many thoughts he set off to Mount expressly to have it out, as he said, with Anne herself. He found her in the library, arranging with old Saymore what books were to be packed to take away, while Heathcote Mountford, looking very black and gloomy, sat at the further window pretending to read, and biting his nails furiously. The mild old Rector wondered for a moment what that sullen figure should have to do in the background, and why Heathcote did not go and leave his cousins free: but there was no time then to think of Heathcote. 'So you are really going,' the Rector said, 'the whole family? It is very early days.'

'Mamma thinks it will be better to make the change at once. She thinks it will do her good, and Rose——'

The Rector fidgeted about the room, pulling out one here and there of a long line of books, and pretending to inspect it. Then he said abruptly, 'The fact was I wanted to speak to you, Anne.'

Heathcote Mountford was sitting some way off, and Mr. Ashley's voice was a gentle one—but he stirred immediately. 'If I am in the way——' he said, getting up. Of course he was in the way; but his faculties must have been very sharp, and his attention very closely fixed on what was going on, to hear those words. The good Rector murmured some apology; but Heathcote strolled away carrying his book in his hand. It was not so easy to get rid of old Saymore, who had a thousand questions to ask; but he, too, went at last.

‘No, we are not taking all the books,’ said Anne, ‘we are taking scarcely anything. My cousin Heathcote does not wish to refurnish the house at present, and as we do not know what we may do eventually, mamma prefers to leave everything. It is a mutual convenience. In this way we may come back in summer, when I hope you will be glad to see us,’ she added with a smile.

‘Of course we shall be glad to see you—I don’t know what we shall do, or how we can get on without you. But that is not the immediate question,’ he said, with some energy. ‘I have come to ask you, now that you have seen Douglas, what is settled, Anne?’

This was the first time the question had been put formally into words. It gave her a little shock. The blood all rallied to her heart to give her strength to answer. She looked him in the face very steadily, that he might not think she was afraid. ‘Settled?’ she said, with a little air of surprise. ‘In present circumstances, and in our deep mourning, what could be settled? We have not even discussed the question.’

‘Then I say that is wrong, Anne,’ said the Rector in a querulous voice. ‘He is a young man, and I am an old one, but it is not a question I should leave undiscussed for an hour. It should be settled what you are going to do.’

‘So far it is settled,’ she said. ‘My duty is with mamma and Rose.’

‘What, Anne!’ cried Mr. Ashley. ‘God bless my soul! You are engaged to be married, and your duty is to your mother and sister? I don’t know what you young people mean.’

Anne did not answer just at once. ‘Did not Charley tell you,’ she said, after a pause, ‘that we were all going away?’

‘Yes, he told me—and I say nothing against

that. It seems to be the way, now. Instead of bearing their grief at home, people flee from it as if it were a plague. Yes, Charley told me; but he could not tell me anything about the other question.'

'Because there is nothing to tell. Dear Rector, don't you know my father did leave me a great legacy, after all——'

'What was that? What was that? Some-think that was not in the will. I thank God for it, Anne,' cried Mr. Ashley. 'It is the best news I have heard for many a day.'

'Oh, don't speak as if it were something new! Mr. Ashley, he left me the care of the property, and the charge of Rose. Can I do whatever I please with this on my hands?'

'Is that all?' the Rector said, in a tone of disappointment; 'but this is exactly the work in which Douglas could help you. A man and a barrister, of course he knows all about it, much better than you can do. And do you mean to tell me that nothing has been settled, *nothing*, Anne?' cried Mr. Ashley, with that vehemence to which mild men are subject. 'Don't talk to me of your mourning; I am not thinking of anything that is to happen to-day or to-morrow; but is it *settled*? That is what I want to know.'

'There is nothing settled,' she said—and they stood there for a minute facing each other, his countenance full of anxiety and distrust, hers very firm and pale, almost blank even with determined no-meaning. She smiled. She would not let him think she was even disconcerted by his questions. And the Rector was baffled by this firmness. He turned away sighing, and wringing his hands. 'God bless my soul!' he said. For it was no use questioning Anne any further—that, at least, was very clear. But as he went away, he came across Heathcote

Mountford who was walking about in the now abandoned hall like a handsome discontented ghost.

‘I am glad to see that you take a great interest in your cousins,’ the Rector said, with a conciliatory smile. He did not feel very friendly, to tell the truth, towards Heathcote Mountford, feeling that his existence was a kind of wrong to Anne and Rose; but yet he was the new lord of the manor, and this is a thing which the spiritual head of a parish is bound to remember, whatever his personal feelings may be. Even in this point of view, however, Heathcote was unsatisfactory—for a poor lord of the manor in the best of circumstances is a trial to a rector, especially one who has been used to a well-to-do squire with liberal ways.

‘My interest is not of much use,’ Heathcote said, ‘for you see, though I have protested, they are going away.’

Just then Mr. Loseby’s phaeton drew up at the door, and he himself got out, enveloped with great-coats and mufflers from head to foot. He was continually coming and going, with an almost restless interest in everything that happened at Mount.

‘It is the very best thing they can do,’ he said. ‘Change of scene: it is the remedy for all trouble now-a-days. They have never seen anything, poor ladies; they have been buried in the country all their lives. And Anne, of course, will like to be in town. That anyone can see with half an eye.’

Here the Rector found another means, if not of satisfying his anxious curiosity, at least of sharing it with some one. He put his arm into Mr. Loseby’s and led him away to the big window. The idea of at least opening his heart to another friend of the family did him good. ‘Do you know,’ he said, with a gasp of excitement, ‘I have been questioning Anne, and she tells me there is nothing settled—nothing settled! I could not believe my ears.’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Mr. Loseby, who was not reverential, ‘what could be settled? A young couple with not a penny between them——’

‘We should not have thought of that, Loseby, in my young days.’

‘We were fools in our young days,’ said the lawyer, with a laugh—‘inexperienced idiots. That’s not the case now. They all know everything that can happen, and calculate the eventualities like a parcel of old women. No, no, the day of imprudent matches is over. Of course there is nothing settled. I never expected it for my part——’

‘But—but, Loseby, he could be of such use to her. They could manage better together than apart——’

‘And so he will be of use to her; he’s not at all a bad fellow; he’ll make himself very pleasant to the whole party. He’ll go with them to the opera, and dine with them three times a week, and be one in all their little expeditions; and he’ll keep his chambers and his club all the same, and have no self-denial forced upon him. He is a most sensible fellow,’ said Mr. Loseby, with a laugh.

The Rector had no great sense of humour. He looked sternly at the little round man all shining and smiling. ‘Do you mean to tell me,’ he said, severely, ‘that you approve of that?’ but the lawyer only laughed again, and would make no reply.

And thus the days went on, leaden-footed, yet getting done one after another, nay, getting shorter, swifter, as the preparations for departure went on. Mrs. Mountford did everything that could be expected of her. She left a sum of money in the Rector’s hands for the usual charities at Christmas, and all the requirements of the parish; and she left instructions with the sexton’s wife, who had once been a housemaid at Mount, and therefore ‘took an interest,’ to have a fresh wreath placed on her

husband's grave weekly on the day he died. So nobody was neglected, living or dead. And their hearts rose a little as the time of departure drew near. Cosmo had thrown his whole soul into the work of house-hunting. And he had found them, which was the most wonderful luck, a small house in Park Lane, which was too dear, Mrs. Mountford thought, yet so cheap as to be almost incredible to anyone who knew what Park Lane was. Even Anne felt a little exhilaration at the thought of windows which should look out upon the Park under the red wintry sunshine, and of all the sights and wonders that would be within reach.

All this time Heathcote stayed on. It was very bad taste, some people thought; and very silly, said other some. Yet still he remained. Of course it must be Rose that was the inducement, Anne being known to be engaged; and Fanny Woodhead did not hesitate to say that she really thought the man had no sense whatever of what was fitting, to stay on, and stay on, until the very last moment. But the household themselves did not object. They had got used to Heathcote. Even Anne liked him at those times when he did not look as if he were sitting in judgment upon Cosmo. Sometimes this was his aspect, and then she could not bear him. But generally he was very supportable. 'You forget I live in London, too,' he said. 'I mean to see a great deal of you there. You may as well let me stay and take care of you on the journey.' And Mrs. Mountford liked the proposal. For purposes of travelling and general caretaking she believed in men, and thought these among their principal uses. She even went so far as to say, 'We shall be very well off in London with Mr. Douglas and your cousin Heathcote:' so strangely had everything changed from the time when St. John Mountford disinherited his daughter because Cosmo was a nobody. Anne did not know

what to think of this change of sentiment. Sometimes it seemed to make everything easier, sometimes to make all further changes impossible. Her heart beat with the idea of seeing him almost daily, looking for his constant visits, feeling the charm of his companionship round her: and then a mist would seem to gather between them, and she would foresee by instinct how Cosmo might, though very near, become very far. After this she would stop short and upbraid herself with folly. How could constant meeting and family companionship make them less near to each other? nothing could be more absurd: and yet the thought—but it was not a thought, scarcely a feeling, only an instinct—would come over her and give her a spiritual chill, a check in all her plans.

‘Mamma says she thinks we will be very well off in London,’ said Rose, ‘and we can go to concerts, and all those sorts of things. There is nothing in a concert contrary to mourning. Dances, of course, and *gay* parties are out of the question,’ she added, with a slight sigh of regret; ‘but it is just when we are going to public places that gentlemen are so useful. You will have your Douglas and I shall have Cousin Heathcote. We shall be very well off——’

To this Anne made no reply. She was taking her papers out of the drawers of her writing-table, arranging them in a large old despatch-box, in which they were henceforth to be carried about the world. Rose came and stood over her curiously, looking at every little bundle as it was taken out.

‘I can see Mr. Douglas’s writing,’ she said. ‘Have you got a great many letters from Mr. Douglas, Anne?’ She put out her hand to touch one that had strayed out of its place. ‘Oh, may I look at it? just one little peep. I want so much to know what a real love-letter is like.’

Anne took her letter up hastily and put it away with a blush and tremor. These sacred utterances in Rose's hands would be profanation indeed. 'Wait, Rosie, she said, 'wait, dear: you will soon have letters of all kinds—of your very own.'

'You mean,' said Rose, 'that now that I am the rich one people will like me the best? Anne, why didn't you give up Mr. Douglas when papa told you? I should have, in a moment, if it had been me; but I suppose you never thought it would come to anything. I must say I think you have been very foolish; you ought to have given him up, and then, now, you would have been free to do as you pleased.'

'I did not make any calculations, Rose. Don't let us talk about it, dear, any more.'

'But I want to talk of it. You see now you never can marry Mr. Douglas at all: so even for that it was silly of you. And you affronted papa—you that always were the clever one, the sensible one, and me the little goose. I can't think how you could have made such a mistake, Anne!'

Anne did not make any answer. The words were childish, but she felt them like a shower of stones thrown at her. 'Now you never can marry Mr. Douglas at all.' Was this how it was going to be?

'Mr. Loseby says,' Rose continued, 'that when I am of age I ought to make a fresh settlement. He says it is all wicked, and blames papa instead of you; but I think you are certainly to blame too. You always stand to a thing so, if you have once said it. A fresh settlement means a new will; it means that I am to give you back a large piece of what papa has left to me.'

'I do not wish you to do so, Rose. If Mr. Loseby had told me first, I should not have let him speak on such a subject. Rose, remember, you are

not to do it. I do not wish any fresh settlement made for me.'

'If Mr. Loseby says it, and mamma says it, of course I must do it, whether you consent or not,' said Rose. 'And, besides, how can you ever marry Mr. Douglas unless there is a fresh settlement? Oh,' cried Rose, 'there is that sealed letter—that secret that you would not let me open—that is to be kept till I am twenty-one. Perhaps that will change everything. Look here: there are only you and me here, and I would never tell. I do so want to know what it is: it might show one what to do if one knew what was in it. Let me, let me open it, Anne!'

'Rose! that is sacred. Rose! you must not touch it. I will never forgive you if you so much as break one seal,' cried Anne.

'Well, then, do it yourself. What can it matter if you break it to-day or in two years and a half? Papa never could mean that you were to keep it there and look at it, and never open it for two years and a half.' All this time Rose turned over and over the little packet with its three red seals, playing with it as a cat plays with a mouse. 'Perhaps it changes everything,' she said; 'perhaps there is a new will here without me having to make it. Why should we all be kept in such suspense, not knowing anything, and poor Mr. Douglas made so unhappy?'

'Did Mr. Douglas tell you that he was unhappy?' said Anne, humouring her tormentor, while she kept her eyes upon the letter. 'Dear Rose, put it back again; here is the place for it. I have a great deal to do, and to think of. Don't worry me, dear, any more.'

Then Rose put it back, but with reluctance. 'If it were addressed to me I should open it at once,' she said. 'It is far more important now than it will be after. Mr. Douglas did not tell me he was unhappy, but he let mamma guess it, which was much

the same. Anne, if I were you, I would break the engagement; I would set him free. It must be dreadful to hold anyone like that bound up for life. And when you think—if nothing turns up, if this is to be the end, if you never have money enough to marry, why shouldn't you do it now, and give yourselves, both of you, another chance?'

Anne rose up from her papers, thrusting them into the despatch-box pell-mell in the confusion of her thoughts. The little calm matter-of-fact voice which sounded so steadily, trilling on like a large cricket—was it speaking the truth? was this, perhaps, what it would have to come to? Her hands trembled as she shut the box hastily; her limbs shook under her. But Rose was no way disturbed. 'You would be sure to get someone else with more money,' she said serenely, 'and so would he.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

GOING AWAY.

BUT this was not the first time that Anne had been driven out of patience by the suggestions of her little sister. When Rose had gone away, she calmed down by degrees and gradually got back her self-possession. What did Rose know about this matter or any other matter in which serious things like the heart, like love and the larger concerns of life were involved? She knew about superficial things, having often a keen power of observation, Anne knew; but the other matters were too high for her. Her unawakened mind could not comprehend them. How could she have found a way of seeing into Cosmo's heart which was denied to Anne? It was impossible; the only thing that could have made her believe in Rose's superior penetration was that, Anne felt, she did not herself understand Cosmo as she had thought she did,

and was perplexed about his course of action, and anxious as to the motives which she could not believe to have been anything but fine and noble. Though his coming had brought her back to something of her original faith, yet she had been checked and chilled without admitting it to herself. All that we can conceive of perfection is, perhaps, what we would have done ourselves in certain circumstances, or, at least, what we would have wished to do, what we might have been capable of in the finest combination of motives and faculties; and whatsoever might be the glosses with which she explained his behaviour to herself, Anne knew very well that this was not how Cosmo had behaved. She could not think of his conduct as carrying out any ideal, and here accordingly was the point in which her mind was weak and subject to attack. But after a while she laughed, or tried to laugh, at herself; 'as if Rose could know!' she said, and settled down to arrange her papers again, and finally to write to Cosmo, which was her way of working off her fright and returning to herself.

'Rose has been talking to me and advising me,' she wrote. 'She has been telling me what I ought to do. And the chief point of all is about you. She thinks, as we are both poor now, that I ought to release you from our engagement, and so "give us both another chance," as she says. It is wonderful the worldly wisdom that is in my little sister. She thinks that you and I could both use this "chance" to our own advantage, and find someone else who is well off as a fitter mate for our respective poverties. Is it the spirit of the time of which we all hear so much, that suggests wisdom like this even in the nursery? It makes me open my eyes and feel myself a fool. And she does it all in such innocence, with her dear little chin turned up, and everything about her so smooth and childlike; she suggests these

villanies with the air of a good little girl saying her lesson. I cannot be sure that it amused me, for you know I am always a little, as you say, *au grand sérieux*; but for you who have a sense of humour, I am afraid it would be very amusing. I wonder, if the people she advises for their good, took Rose at her word, whether she would be horrified? I hope and believe she would. And as for you, Cosmo, I trust you will let me know when you want to be freed from your engagement. I am afraid it would take that to convince me. I cannot think of you even, from any level but your own, and, as that is above mine, how could it be comprehensible to Rose? This calculation would want trigonometry (is not that the science?), altogether out of my power. Give me a hint from yourself, dear Cosmo, when that moment arrives. I shall know you have such a motive for it as will make it worthy of you.'

When she had written this she was relieved: though perhaps the letter might never be sent to its address. In this way her desk was full of scraps which she had written to Cosmo for the relief of her mind rather than the instruction of his. Perhaps, if her confidence in him had been as perfect as she thought, she would have sent them all to him. They were all appeals to the ideal Cosmo who was her real lover, confidences in him, references to his understanding and sympathy, which never would have failed had he been what she thought. This had been the charm and delight of her first and earliest abandonment of heart and soul to her love. But as one crisis came after another, or rather since the last crisis came which had supplied such cruel tests, Anne had grown timid of letting all these outpourings reach his eyes: though she continued to write them all the same, and they relieved her own heart. When she had done this now, her mind regained its serenity. What a wonder was little

Rose! Where had the child learned all that 'store of petty maxims,' all those suggestions of prudence? Anne smiled to herself with the indulgence which we all have for a child. Some people of a rough kind are amused by hearing blasphemies, oaths which have no meaning as said by her, come out of a child's lips. It was with something of the same kind of feeling that Anne received her little sister's recommendations. They did not amuse her indeed, but yet impressed her as something ludicrous, less to be blamed than to be smiled at, not calling forth any real exercise of judgment, nor to be considered as things serious enough to be judged at all.

The packing up kept the house in commotion, and it was curious how little feeling there was, how little of the desolation of parting, the sense of breaking up a long-established home. The pleasure of freedom and expectations of a new life were great even with Mrs. Mountford: and Rose's little decorous sorrow had long ago worked itself out. 'Some natural tears she dropped, but wiped them soon.' And it did not give these ladies any great pang to leave Mount. They were not leaving it really, they said to themselves. So long as the furniture was there, which was Mrs. Mountford's, it was still their house, though the walls of it belonged to Heathcote—and then, if Heathcote 'came forward,' as Mrs. Mountford, at least, believed he would do——. Rose did not think anything at all about this. At first, no doubt, it had appeared to her as rather a triumph, to win the affections of the heir of entail, and to have it in her power to assume the position of head of the house, as her mother had done. But, as the sniff of the freshening breeze came to her from the unseen seas on which she was about to launch forth, Rose began to feel more disdain than pleasure for such easy triumphs. Cousin Heathcote was handsome, but he was elderly—thirty-five! and she

was only eighteen. No doubt there were finer things in the unknown than any she had yet caught sight of; and what was Mount? a mere simple country house, not half so grand as Meadowlands—that the possible possession of it in the future should so much please a rich girl with a good fortune and everything in her favour. Leaving home did not really count for much in her mind, as she made her little individual preparations. The future seemed her own, the past was not important one way or another. And having given her sister the benefit of her advice with such decision, she felt herself still more able to advise Keziah, who cried as she put up Miss Rose's things. On the whole, perhaps, there was more fellowship between Keziah and Rose than the little maid felt with the more serious Anne, who was so much older than herself, though the same age.

‘I would not have married Saymore if I had been you,’ said Rose. ‘You will never know anything more than Hunston all your life now, Keziah. You should have come with me into the world. At Mount, or in a little country place, how could you ever see anybody? You have had no choice at all—Jim, whom you never could have married, and now old Saymore. I suppose your aunt thinks it is a great thing for you—but I don't think it a great thing. If you had come with us, you might have done so much better. I wish you had consulted me——’

‘So do I, Miss Rose,’ said Keziah, dropping tears into the box, which, fortunately, contained only boots and shoes, and articles which would not mark. ‘Oh! I wish I had talked to you at the very first! but I was distracted like, Miss Rose, about poor Jim, and I couldn't think of anything else.’

‘That was nonsense,’ said Rose; ‘that was always

quite out of the question; how could you have married a poor labourer after having been used to live with us, and have every comfort? It would have killed you, Keziah; you were never very strong, you know; and only think! you that have had fires in your room, and nice luncheons three or four times a day, how could you ever live upon a bit of bacon and weak tea, like the women in the cottages? You never could have married him.'

'That is what aunt used to tell me,' said Keziah faintly; 'she said I should have been the first to repent; but then Miss Anne——'

'Oh, never mind Miss Anne—she is so romantic. She never thinks about bread and butter,' said Rose. 'Jim is out of the question, and there is no use thinking of him; but old Saymore is just as bad,' said the little oracle; 'I am not sure that he isn't the worst of the two.'

'Do you think so, Miss Rose?' said Keziah wistfully. It was an ease to her mind to have her allegiance to Jim spoken of so lightly. Anne had treated it as a solemn matter, as if it were criminal to 'break it off;' whereas Keziah's feeling was that she had a full right to choose for herself in the matter. But old Saymore was a different question. If she could have had the 'Black Bull' without him, no doubt it would have been much better. And now here was a rainbow glimmer of possible glories better even than the 'Black Bull' passing over her path! She looked up with tears in her eyes. Something pricked her for her disloyalty to Miss Anne, but Miss Rose was 'more comforting like.' Perhaps this wiser counsellor would even yet see some solution to the question, so that poor old Saymore might be left out of it.'

'I think,' said Rose with decision, 'that suppose I had been engaged to anyone, when I left Mount, I should have given it up. I should have said, "I am

going into the world. I don't know what may be best now ; things will be so very different. Of course, I don't want to be disagreeable, but I must do the best for myself." And anybody of sense would have seen it and consented to it,' said Rose. 'Of course you must always do the best you can for yourself.'

'Yes, Miss Rose,' said Keziah. This chimed with her own profoundest instincts. 'But then there's mother and the boys. Mother was to be in the kitchen, and Johnny in the stable, and little Tom bred up for a waiter. It was setting them all up in the world, aunt said.'

'All that may be very well,' said Rose. 'Of course it is always right to be kind to your mother and the rest. But remember that your first duty is always to yourself. And if you like to come with me, I am to have a maid all to myself, Keziah ; and you would soon find someone better than old Saymore, if you wanted to marry. You may be very sure of that.'

With this Rose marched away, very certain that she had given the best of advice to the little maid. But Keziah remained doubtful, weeping freely into the trunk which held the boots and shoes. After all there remained 'mother and the boys' to think of, who would not be bettered by any such means of doing the best for herself as Rose had pointed out. Keziah thought, perhaps it would be better after all to submit the question once more to Miss Anne, before her final decision was given forth.

The other servants were affected by the breaking up more in Keziah's way than with any dismal realisation in their own persons of a conclusion to this chapter of life. They had all 'characters' that would procure them new places wherever they went ; for Mrs. Mountford had not tolerated any black sheep. And as for old Saymore, he was greatly elated

by his approaching landlordship, and the marriage which he hoped was settled. He was not aware of Rose's interference, nor of the superior hopes which she had dangled before his bride. 'I don't need to say as I'm sorry to leave, sir,' Saymore said to Mr. Loseby, who settled his last bills; 'and sorry, very sorry, for the occasion. Master was a gentleman as seemed to have many years' life in him, and to be cut off like that is a lesson to us all. But the living has to think of themselves, sir, when all's done as can be done to show respect for the dead. And I don't know as I could have had a finer opening. I will miss a deal as I've had here, Mr. Loseby. The young ladies I'll ever take the deepest interest in. I've seen 'em grow up, and it'll always be a 'appiness to see them, and you too, sir, as has always been most civil, at my 'otel. But though there's a deal to regret, there's something on the other side to be thankful for, and we're told as everything works together for the best.'

This was the idea very strong in the mind of the house. As the landlord of the 'Black Bull' holds a higher position in the world than even the most trusted of butlers, so the position of Mrs. Cook, as henceforward housekeeper and virtual mistress of Mount, was more dignified than when she was only at the head of the kitchen: and Worth, if she did not gain in dignity, had at least the same compensation as her mistress, and looked forward to seeing the world, and having a great deal of variety in her life. They all said piously that everything worked together for the best. So that poor Mr. Mountford was the cause of a great deal of gratification to his fellow-creatures without knowing or meaning it, when his horse put his foot into that rabbit-hole. The harm he did his favourite child scarcely counted as against the advantage he did to many of his dependents. Such are the compensations in death as in life.

But it was December before they got away. After all it turned out that 'mother and the boys' had more weight with Keziah than Rose's offer, and the promise of superior advantage in the future; and she was left in the cottage she came from, preparing her wedding things, and learning by daily experiment how impossible it would have been to content herself with a similar cottage, weak tea, bad butter, and fat bacon, instead of the liberal *régime* of the servants' hall, which Rose had freely and graphically described as meaning 'three or four nice luncheons a day.' The Mountfords finally departed with very little sentiment; everything was provided for, even the weekly wreath on the grave, and there was nothing for anyone to reproach herself with. Anne, as usual, was the one who felt the separation most. She was going to Cosmo's constant society, and to the enjoyment of many things she had pined for all her life. Yet the visionary wrench, the total rending asunder of life and all that was implied in it, affected her more than she could say, more than, in the calm of the others, there seemed any reason for. She went out the day before for a long farewell walk, while Rose was still superintending her packing. Anne made a long round through the people in the village, glad that the women should cry, and that there should be some sign here at least of more natural sentiment—and into the Rectory, where she penetrated to the Rector's study, and was standing by him with her hand upon his arm before he was aware. 'I have come to say good-bye,' she said—looking at him with a smile, yet tears in her eyes.

The Rector rose to his feet hastily and took her into his arms. 'God bless you, my dear child! but you might have been sure I would have come to see the last of you, to bid you farewell at the carriage door——'

‘Yes,’ said Anne, clinging to her old friend, ‘but that is not like good-bye here, is it? where I have always been allowed to come to you, all my life.’

‘And always shall!’ cried the Rector, ‘whenever you want me, howsoever I can be of any use to you!’

The Curate came in while they were still clinging to each other, talking, as people will do when their hearts are full, of one who was no longer there to be bidden good-bye to—the Rector’s wife, for whom he went mourning always, and who had been fond of Anne. Thus she said her farewell both to the living and the dead. Charley walked solemnly by her side up to the park gates. He did not say much; his heart was as heavy as lead in his breast. ‘I don’t know how the world is to go on without you,’ he said; ‘but I suppose it will, all the same.’

‘After a while it will not make much difference,’ said Anne.

‘I suppose nothing makes much difference after a while,’ the Curate said; and at the park gates he said good-bye. ‘I shall be at the train to-morrow—but you don’t want me to go to all the other places with you,’ he said with a sigh; ‘and it is of no use telling you, Anne, as my father did, that, night or day, I am at your service whenever you may want me—you know that.’

‘Yes, I know it,’ she said, giving him her hand; but she was glad that he left her free to visit some other sacred places alone.

Then, as he went back drearily to the parish in which lay all his duty, his work in the world, but which would be so melancholy with Mount shut up and silent, she went lightly over the frosty grass, which crackled under her feet, to the beeches, to visit them once more and think of her tryst under them. How different they were now! She remembered the soft air of summer, the full greenness of the foliage, the sounds of voices all charmed and

sweet with the genial heat of August. How different now! Everything at her feet lay frost-bound; the naked branches overhead were white with rime. Nothing was stirring in the wintry world about save the blue smoke from the house curling lazily far off through the anatomy of the leafless trees. This was where she had sat with Cosmo talking, as if talk would never have an end. As she stood reflecting over this with a certain sadness, not sure, though she should see Cosmo to-morrow, that she ever would talk again as she had talked then pouring forth the whole of her heart—Anne was aware of a step not far off crackling upon a fallen branch. She turned round hastily and saw Heathcote coming towards her. It was not a pleasant surprise.

‘You are saying good-bye,’ he said, ‘and I am an intruder. Pardon me; I strayed this way by accident——’

‘Never mind,’ said Anne; ‘yes, I am saying good-bye.’

‘Which is the last word you should say, with my will.’

‘Thanks, Cousin Heathcote, you are very good. I know how kind you have been. If I seem to be ungrateful,’ said Anne, ‘it is not that I don’t feel it, but only that my heart is full.’

‘I know that,’ he said, ‘very well. I was not asking any gratitude. The only thing that I feel I have a right to do is to grumble, because everything was settled, everything! before I had a chance.’

‘That is your joke,’ said Anne, with a smile; and then, after a time, she added, ‘Will you take me to the spot as far as you remember it, the very spot——’

‘I know,’ he said; and they went away solemnly side by side, away from that spot consecrated to love and all its hopeful memories, crossing together the crisp ice-bound grass. The old house rose up in

front of them against the background of earth and sky, amid the clustering darkness of the leafless branches. It was all silent, nothing visible of the life within, except the blue smoke rising faintly through the air, which was so still. They said little as they went along by the great terrace and the lime avenue, avoiding the flower-garden, now so bare and brown. The winter's chill had paralysed everything. 'The old house will be still a little more sad to-morrow,' Heathcote said.

'I don't think it ought to be. You have not the affection for it which you might have had, had you known it better: but some time or other it will blossom for you and begin another life.'

He shook his head. 'May I bring Edward to see you in Park Lane? Edward is my other life,' he said, 'and you will see how little strength there is in that.'

'But, Cousin Heathcote, you must not speak so. Why should you? You are young; life is all before a man at your age.'

'Who told you that?' he said with a smile. 'That is one of your feminine delusions. An old fellow of thirty-five, when he is an old fellow, is as old as Methuselah, Anne. He has seen everything and exhausted everything. This is the true age at which all is vanity. If he catches at a new interest and begins to hope for a renewal of his heart, something is sure to come in and stop him. He is frustrated and all his opportunities baulked as in my own case—or something else happens. I know you think a great deal more of our privileges than they deserve.'

'We are taught to do so,' said Anne. 'We are taught that all our best time is when we are young, but that it is different with a man. A man, so to speak, never grows old.'

‘One knows what that means. He is supposed to be able to marry at any age. And so he is—somebody. But, if you will reflect, few men want to marry in the abstract. They want to marry one individual person, who, so far as my experience goes, is very often, most generally I should say, not for them. Do you think it is a consolation for the man who wants to marry Ethelinda, that probably Walburgha might have him if he asked her? I don’t see it. You see how severely historical I am in my names.’

‘They are both Mountford names,’ said Anne, ‘but very severe—archæological, rather than historical.’ And then they came out on the other side and were silent, coming to the broad stretch of the park on which Mr. Mountford’s accident took place. They walked along very silently with a sort of mournful fellowship between them. So far as this went there was nobody in the world with whom Anne could feel so much in common. His mind was full of melancholy recollections as he walked along the crisp and crackling grass. He seemed to see the quiet evening shadows, the lights in the windows, and to hear the tranquil voice of the father of the family pointing out the welcome which the old house seemed to give: and then the stumble, the fall, the cry; and the long long watch in the dark, so near help—the struggles of the horse—the stillness of the huddled heap which could scarcely be identified from the horse, in the fatal gloom. When they came to the spot they stood still, as over a grave. There were still some marks of the horse’s frantic hoofs in the heavy grass.

‘Was it long?’ he said. ‘The time seemed years to me—but I suppose it was not an hour.’

‘They thought only about half-an-hour,’ said Anne, in a low reverential voice.

‘A few minutes were enough,’ Heathcote said,

and again there was a silence. He took her hand, scarcely knowing what he did.

‘We are almost strangers,’ he said; ‘but this one recollection will bind us together, will it not, for all our lives?’

Anne gave a soft pressure to his hand, partly in reply, partly in gratitude. Her eyes were full of tears, her voice choked. ‘I hope he had no time to think,’ she said.

‘A moment, but no more. I feel sure that after that first cry, and one groan, there was no more.’

She put down her veil and wept silently as they went back to the house. Mrs. Mountford all the time was sitting with Rose in her bedroom watching Worth as she packed all the favourite knicknacks, which make a lady’s chamber pretty and homelike. She liked to carry these trifles about, and she was interested and anxious about their careful packing. Thus it was only the daughter whom he had wronged who thought of the dead father on the last day which the family spent at Mount.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A NEW BEGINNING.

For people who are well off, not to say rich, and who have no prevailing anxieties to embitter their life, and who take an interest in what is going on around them, London is a pleasant place enough, even in December. And still more is Park Lane a pleasant place. To see the red wintry sunshine lighting up the misty expanse of the Park, the brisk pedestrians going to and fro under the bare trees, the carriages following each other along the broad road, the coveys of pretty children and neat nursemaids, and all the flood of prosperous life that flows along, leisurely in the morning, crowding in

the afternoons, is very pleasant to the uninitiated. All the notable people that are to be found in London at that period, appearing now and then, and a great many people who get lost to sight in the throngs of the season, but are more worth seeing than even those throngs, were pointed out to the ladies by the two cicerones who took in hand to enlighten their ignorance. The house they had was one of those small houses with large, ample, bow windows to the drawing-rooms, which give a sort of rustic, irregular simplicity to this street of the rich. Those people who are happy and well off and live in Park Lane must be happier and more well off than people anywhere else. They must be amused besides, which is no small addition to happiness. Even Anne felt that to sit at that window all day long would be a pleasant way of occupying a day. The misty distance, penetrated by the red rays of sunshine, was a kind of poem, relieved by the active novelty of the animated foreground, the busy passengers, the flood and high tide of life. How different from the prospect over the park at Mount, where Charley Ashley on the road, coming up from the Rectory, was something to look at, and an occasional friend with him the height of excitement. The red rays made the mist brighter and brighter; the crowd increased; the carriages went faster; and then the sun waned and got low and went out in a bank of cloud, and the lamps were all lighted in the misty twilight, but still the crowd went on. The ladies sat at the window and were amused, as by a scene in a play; and then to think that 'all the pictures,' by which Anne meant the National Gallery, were within reach—and many another wonder, of which they had been able to snatch a hasty glance once a year, or not so often as once a year, but which was now daily at their hand: and even, last, but yet important, the shops behind all, in which everything

that was interesting was to be found. Rose and her mother used to like, when they had nothing better and more important to buy, to go to the Japanese shop, and turn over the quaint articles there. Everything was new to them, as if they had come from the South Seas. But the newest of all was this power of doing something whenever they pleased, finding something to look at, something to hear, something to buy. The power of shopping is in itself an endless delight to country ladies. Nothing to do but to walk into a beautiful big place, with obsequious people ready to bring you whatever you might want, graceful young women putting on every variety of mantle to please you, bland men unfolding the prettiest stuffs, the most charming dresses. The amusement thus afforded was unending. Even Anne liked it, though she was so highflown. Very different from the misty walk through their own park to ask after some sick child, or buy postage stamps at the village post-office. This was about all that could be done at Mount. But London was endless in its variety. And then there was sight-seeing such as never could be managed when people came up to town only for a month in the season. Mr. Mountford indeed had been impatient at the mere idea that his family wanted to see St. Paul's and the Tower, like rustics come to town for a holiday. Now they were free to do all this with nobody to interfere.

And it was Cosmo who was their guide, philosopher, and friend in this new career. He had chosen their house for them, with which they were all so entirely pleased, and it was astonishing how often he found leisure to go with them here and there, explaining to them that his work was capable of being done chiefly in the morning, and that those afternoon hours were not good for much. 'Besides, you know the time of a briefless barrister is never of

much importance,' he said, with a laugh. Rose was very curious on this point. She questioned him a great deal more closely than Anne would have done. 'Are you really a briefless barrister, Mr. Douglas? What is a briefless barrister? Does that mean that you have no work at all to do?' she said.

'Not very much. Sometimes I am junior with some great man who gets all the fees and all the reputation. Sometimes an honest, trustful individual, with a wrong to be redressed, comes to ask my advice. This happens now and then, just to keep me from giving in altogether. It is enough to swear by, that is about all,' he said.

'Then it is not enough to live on,' said Rose, pushing her inquiries to the verge of rudeness. But Cosmo was not offended. He was indulgent to her curiosity of every kind.

'No, not near enough to live on. I get other little things to do, you know—sometimes I write a little for the newspapers—sometimes I have a report to write or an inquiry to conduct. And sometimes a kind lady, a friend to the poor, will ask me out to dinner,' he said, with a laugh. They were sitting at dinner while this conversation was going on.

'But then, how could you——?' Rose began, then stopped short, and looked at her sister. 'I will ask you that afterwards,' she said.

'Now or afterwards, your interest does me honour, and I shall do my best to satisfy you,' said Cosmo, with a bow of mock submission. He was more light-hearted, Anne thought, than she had ever seen him before; and she was a little surprised by the amount of leisure he seemed to have. She had formed no idea of the easy life of the class of so-called poor men to which Cosmo belonged. According to her ideas they were all toiling, lying in wait for Fortune, working early and late, and letting no opportunity slip. She could have understood the

patience, the weariness, the obstinate struggle of such lives; but she could not understand how, being poor, they could get on so comfortably, and with so little strain, with leisure for everything that came in the way, and so many little luxuries. Anne was surprised by the fact that Cosmo could bestow his afternoons upon their little expeditions, and go to the club when he left them, and be present at all the theatres when anything of importance was going on, and altogether show so little trace of the pressure which she supposed his work could not fail to make upon him. He seemed indeed to have fewer claims upon his time than she herself had. Sometimes she was unable to go out with the others, having letters from Mr. Loseby to answer, or affairs of the estate to look after; but Cosmo's engagements were less pressing. How was it? she asked herself. Surely it was not in this way that men got to be Judges, Lord Chancellors—all those great posts which had been in Anne's mind since first she knew that her lover belonged to the profession of the law. That he must be aspiring to these heights seemed to her inevitable—and especially now, when she had lost all her money, and there was no possible means of union for them, save in his success. But could success be won so easily? Was it by such simple means that men got to the top of the tree, or even reached as far as offices which were not the highest?

These questions began to meet and bewilder her very soon after their arrival, after the first pleasure of falling into easy constant intercourse with the man who loved her and whom she loved.

At first it had been but too pleasant to see him continually, to get acquainted with the new world in which they were living, through his means, and to admire his knowledge of everything—all the people and all their histories. But by-and-by

Anne's mind began to get bewildered. She was only a woman and did not understand—nay, only a girl, and had no experience. Perhaps, it was possible men got through their work by such a tremendous effort of power that the strain could only be kept up for a short period of time; perhaps Cosmo was one of those wonderful people who accomplish much without ever seeming to be employed at all; perhaps—and this she felt was the most likely guess—it was her ignorance that did not understand anything about the working of an accomplished mind, but expected everything to go on in the jog-trot round of labour which was all she understood. Happy are the women who are content to think that all is well which they are told is well—and who can believe in their own ignorance and be confident in the better knowledge of the higher beings with whom they are connected. Anne could not do this—she abode as in a city of refuge in her own ignorance, and trusted in that to the fullest extent of her powers—but still her mind was confused and bewildered. She could not make it out. At the same time, however, she was quite incapable of Rose's easy questioning. She could not take Cosmo to task for his leisure, and ask him how he was employing it. When she heard her little sister's interrogations she was half alarmed, half horrified. Fools rush in—she did not say this to herself, but something like it was in her thoughts.

After this particular dinner, however, Rose kept to her design very steadily. She beckoned Cosmo to come to her when he came upstairs. Rose's rise into importance since her father's death had been one of the most curious incidents in the family history. It was not that she encroached upon the sphere of Anne, who was supreme in the house as she had always been—almost more supreme now, as having the serious business in her hands; nor was

she disobedient to her mother, who, on her side, was conscientiously anxious not to spoil the little heiress, or allow her head to be turned by her elevation. But Rose had risen somehow, no one could tell how. She was on the top of the wave—the successfulness of success was in her veins, exhilarating her, calling forth all her powers. Anne, though she had taken her own deposition with so much magnanimity, had yet been somewhat changed and subdued by it. The gentle imperiousness of her character, sympathetic yet naturally dominant, had been already checked by these reverses. She had been stopped short in her life, and made to pause and ask of the world and the unseen those questions which, when once introduced into existence, make it impossible to go on with the same confidence and straightforward rapidity again. But little Rose was full of confidence and curiosity and faith in herself. She did not hesitate either in advising or questioning the people around her. She had told Anne what she ought to do—and now she meant to tell Cosmo. She had no doubt whatever as to her competence for it, and she liked the *rôle*.

‘Come and sit here beside me,’ she said. ‘I am going to ask you a great many questions. Was that all true that you told me at dinner, or was it your fun? Please tell me in earnest this time. I want so very much to know.’

‘It would have been poor fun; not much of a joke, I think. No, it was quite true.’

‘All of it? About writing in the newspapers, and one person asking your advice once in a way? And about ladies asking you out to dinner?’

‘Perhaps that would be a little too matter-of-fact. I have always had enough to pay for my dinner. Yes, I think I can say that much,’ said Cosmo, with a laugh.

‘But that does not make very much difference,’ said Rose. ‘Well, then, now I must ask you another question. How did you think, Mr. Douglas, that you could marry Anne?’

She spoke low, so that nobody else could hear, and looked him full in the face, with her seeming innocence. The question was so unexpected, and the questioner so unlike a person entitled to institute such examinations, that Cosmo was entirely taken by surprise. He gave an almost gasp of amazement and consternation, and though he was not easily put out, his countenance grew crimson.

‘How did I think I could——? You put a very startling question. I always knew I was entirely unworthy,’ he stammered out.

‘But that isn’t what I meant a bit. Anne is awfully superior,’ said Rose. ‘I always knew she was—but more than ever now. I am not asking you how you ventured to ask her, or anything of that sort—but how did you think that you could marry—when you had only enough to be sure of paying for your own dinner? And I don’t mean either just at first, for of course you thought she would be rich. But when you knew that papa was so angry, and that everything was so changed for her, how *could* you think you could go on with it? It is that that puzzles me so.’

Rose was seated in a low chair, busy with a piece of crewel work, from which she only raised her eyes now and then to look him in the face with that little matter-of-fact air, leaving him no loophole of sentiment to escape by. And he had taken another seat on a higher elevation, and had been stooping over her with a smile on his face, so altogether unsuspecting of any attack that he had actually no possibility of escape. Her half-childish look paralysed him: it was all he could do not to gape at her with open mouth of bewilderment and confusion.

But her speech was a long one, and gave him a little time to get up his courage.

‘You are very right,’ he said. ‘I did not think you had so much judgment. How could I think of it—I cannot tell. It is presumption; it is wretched injustice to her—to think of dragging her down into my poverty.’

‘But you don’t seem a bit poor, Mr. Douglas; that is the funny thing—and you are not very busy or working very hard. I think it would all be very nice for you, and very comfortable. But I cannot see, for my part,’ said the girl, tranquilly, ‘what you would do with Anne.’

‘Those are questions which we do not discuss——’ he was going to say ‘with little girls,’ being angry; but he paused in time—‘I mean which we can only discuss, Anne and I, between ourselves.’

‘Oh, Anne! she would never mind!’ said Rose, with a certain contempt.

‘What is it that Anne would never mind?’ said Mrs. Mountford. Anne was out of the room, and had not even seen this curious inquisition into the meaning of her betrothed.

‘Nothing at all that is prudent, mamma. I was asking Mr. Douglas how he ever thought he would be able to get married, living such an easy life.’

‘Rose, are you out of your senses?’ cried her mother, in alarm. ‘You will not mind her, Mr. Douglas, she is only a child—and I am afraid she has been spoiled of late. Anne has always spoiled her: and since her dear papa has been gone, who kept us all right——’

Here Mrs. Mountford put her handkerchief lightly to her eyes. It was her tribute to the occasion. On the whole she was finding her life very pleasant, and the pressure of the cambric to her eyelids was the little easy blackmail to sorrow which she habitually paid.

‘She asks very pertinent questions,’ said Cosmo, getting up from the stool of repentance upon which he had been placed, with something between a smile and a sigh.

‘She always had a great deal of sense, though she is such a child,’ said her mother fondly; ‘but, my darling, you must learn that you really cannot be allowed to meddle with things that don’t concern you. People always know their own affairs best.’

At this moment Anne came back. When the subject of a discussion suddenly enters the place in which it has been going on, it is strange how foolish everybody looks, and what a sense of wrong-doing is generally diffused in the atmosphere. They had been three together to talk, and she was but one. Cosmo, who, whatever he might do, or hesitate to do, had always the sense in him of what was best, the perception of moral beauty and ideal grace which the others wanted, looked at her as she came across the room with such compunctious tenderness in his eyes as the truest lover in existence could not have surpassed. He admired and loved her, it seemed to him, more than he ever did before. And Anne surprised this look of renewed and half-adoring love. It went through and through her like a sudden warm glow of sunshine, enveloping her in sudden warmth and consolation. What a wonderful glory, what a help and encouragement in life, to be loved like that! She smiled at him with the tenderest gratitude. Though there might be things in which he fell below the old ideal Cosmo, to whom all those scraps of letters in her desk had been addressed, still life had great gladness in it which had this Cosmo to fall back upon. She returned to that favourite expression, which sometimes lately she had refrained even from thinking of, and with a glance called him to her, which she had done very little of

late. 'I want your advice about Mr. Loseby's letter,' she said. And thus the first result of Rose's cross-examination was to bring the two closer to each other. They went together into the inner room, where Anne had her writing-table and all her business papers, and where they sat and discussed Mr. Loseby's plans for the employment of money. 'I would rather, *far* rather, do something for the estate with it,' Anne said. 'Those cottages! my father would have consented to have them; and Rose always took an interest in them, almost as great an interest as I did. She will be so well off, what does it matter? Comfort to those poor people is of far more importance than a little additional money in the bank, for that is what it comes to—not even money to spend, we have plenty of that.'

'You do not seem to think that all this should have been for yourself, Anne. Is it possible? It is more than I could have believed.'

'Dear Cosmo,' said Anne, apologetically, 'you know I have never known what it is to be poor. I don't understand it. I am intellectually convinced, you know, that I am a beggar, and Rose has everything; but otherwise it does not have the slightest effect upon me. I don't understand it. No, I am not a beggar. I have five hundred a year.'

'Till that little girl comes of age,' he said, with an accent of irritation which alarmed Anne. She laid her soft hand upon his to calm him.

'You like Rose well enough, Cosmo; you have been so kind to her, taking them everywhere. Don't be angry, it is not her fault.'

'No, it is my fault,' he said. 'I am at the bottom of all the mischief. It is I who have spoiled your life. She has been talking to me, that child, and with the most perfect reason. She says how could I think of marrying Anne if I was so poor? She is quite right, my dearest: how could I think

of marrying you, of throwing my shadow across your beautiful, bright, prosperous life?’

‘For that matter,’ said Anne, with a soft laugh, ‘you did not, Cosmo—you only thought of loving me. You are like the father in the “*Précieuses Ridicules*,” do you remember, who so shocked everybody by coming brutally to marriage at once. *That*, after all, has not so much to do with it. Scores of people have to wait for years and years. In the meantime the *pays de tendre* is very sweet; don’t you think so?’ she said, turning to him soft eyes which were swimming in a kind of dew of light, liquid brightness and happiness, like a glow of sunshine in them. What could Cosmo do or say? He protested that it was very sweet, but not enough. That nothing would be enough till he could carry her away to the home which should be hers and his, and where nobody would intermeddle. And Anne was as happy as if her lover, speaking so earnestly, had been transformed at once into the hero and sage, high embodiment of man in all the nobleness of which man is capable, which it was the first necessity of her happiness that he should be.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HEATHCOTE’S CAREER.

HEATHCOTE MOUNTFORD went with his cousins to London, and when he had taken them to their house, returned to his chambers in the Albany. They were very nice rooms. I do not know why an unmarried man’s lodging should be called chambers, but it does not make them at all different from other rooms which are not dignified by that name. They were very comfortable, but not very orderly, with numbers of books about, and a boot or two now and then straying where it had no right to be,

but also with the necessary curiosities and prettinesses which are now part of the existence of every well-bred person, though these were not shown off to the full advantage, but lost among a good deal of litter scattered here and there. He was not a man who put his best foot foremost in any way, but let his treasures lie about, and permitted his own capacities and high qualities to go to rust under the outside covering of indifference and do-nothingness. It had never been necessary to him to do anything. He had very little ambition, and whatever zeal for enjoyment had been in his life, had been satisfied and was over. He had wandered over a great part of the earth, and noticed many things in a languid way, and then he had come home and gone to his chambers, and, unpacking the treasures which, like everybody else, he had taken some trouble to 'pick up' here and there, suffered them to lie about among all sorts of trifling things. He had Edward to care for, his younger brother, who made a rush upon him now and then, from school first, and then from Sandhurst, always wanting money, and much indulgence for his peccadilloes and stupidities: but no one else who took any interest in himself or his possessions: and Edward liked a cigar far better than a bronze, and among all his brother's possessions, except bank notes and stray sovereigns, or an occasional cheque when he had been more extravagant than usual, cared for nothing but the French novels, which Heathcote picked up too, not because he liked them much, but because everybody did so—and Edward liked them because they were supposed to be so wrong. Edward was not on the whole an attractive boy. He had a great many tastes and a great many friends who were far from agreeable to his brother, but he was the only real 'object in life' to Heathcote, who petted him much and lectured him as little as was possible. There seemed to be scarcely any other point at which

his own contemplative, inactive existence touched the practical necessities of life.

He came back to London with the idea that he would be very glad to return again to the quiet of his chambers, where nothing ever happened. He said to himself that excursions into the outer world, where something was always happening, were a mistake. He had but stepped out of his hermitage without thinking, once in a way, to pay a visit which, after all, was a duty visit, when a whole tragedy came straightway about his ears—accident, death, sorrow, injustice, a heroine, and a cruel father, and all the materials of a full-blown romance. How glad he would be, he thought, to get into his hermitage again! Within its quiet centre there was everything a man wanted—books, an occasional cigar, an easy chair (when it was clear from papers and general literature) for a friend to sit in. But when he did get back, he was not so certain of its advantages: no doubt it was everything that could be desired—but yet, it was a hermitage, and the outlook from the windows was not cheerful. If Park Lane was brighter than the view across the park at Mount, the Albany, with its half-monastic shade, like a bit of a male *béguinage*, was less bright. He sat at his window, vaguely looking out—a thing he had never had the slightest inclination to do before—and felt an indescribable sense of the emptiness of his existence. Nor was this only because he had got used to the new charms of household life, and liked a house with women in it, as he had suggested to himself—not even that—it was an influence more subtle. He took Edward with him to Park Lane, and presented that hero, who did not understand his new relations. He thought Rose was ‘very jolly,’ but Anne alarmed him. And the ladies were not very favourably moved towards Edward. Heathcote had hoped that his young

brother might be captivated by them, and that this might very possibly be the making of him: as the friends of an unsatisfactory young man are always so ready to hope. But the result did not justify his expectation. 'If the little 'un were by herself, without those two old fogeys, she might, perhaps, be fun,' Edward thought, and then he gave his brother a description of the favourite Bet Bouncer of his predilections. This attempt having failed, Heathcote for his part did not fall into mere aimless fluttering about the house in Park Lane as for a time he had been tempted to do. It was not the mere charm of female society which had moved him. Life had laid hold upon him on various sides, and he could not escape into his shell, as of old. Just as Cosmo Douglas had felt, underneath all the external gratifications of his life, the consciousness that everybody was asking, 'What Douglasses does he belong to?' so Heathcote, in the stillness of his chambers, was conscious that his neighbours were saying, 'He is Mountford of Mount.' As a matter of fact very few people knew anything about Mount—but it is hard even for the wisest to understand how matters which so deeply concern themselves should be utterly unimportant to the rest of the world. And by-and-by many voices seemed to wake up round him, and discuss him on all sides. 'He has a very nice old place in the country, and a bit of an entailed estate—nothing very great, but lands that have been in the family for generations. Why doesn't he go and look after it?' He did not know if those words were really said by anyone, yet he seemed to hear them circling about his head, coming like labels in an old print out of the mouths of the men at his club. 'Why doesn't he look after his estate? Is there nothing to be done on his property that he stays on, leading this idle life here?' It was even an object of surprise to his friends that

he had not taken the good of the shooting or invited anyone to share it. He seemed to himself to be hunted out of his snug corner. The Albany was made unbearable to him. He held out as long as the ladies remained in Park Lane, but when they were gone he could not stand it any longer—not, he represented to himself, that it was on their account he remained in London. But there was a certain duty in the matter, which restrained him from doing as he pleased while they were at hand and might require his aid. They never did in the least require his aid—they were perfectly well off, with plenty of means, and servants, and carriages, and unbounded facilities for doing all they wanted. But when they went away, as they did in February, he found out, what he had been suspecting for some time, that London was one vast and howling wilderness, that the Albany was a hideous travesty of monasticism, fit only for men without souls, and lives without duties; and that when a man has anything that can be called his natural business in life, it is the right thing that he should do it. Therefore, to the astonishment and disgust of Edward, who liked to have his brother's chambers to come to when he 'ran up to town'—a thing less difficult then than in these days of stricter discipline—Heathcote Mountford turned his back upon his club and his hermitage, and startled the parish out of its wits by arriving suddenly on a rainy day in February at the dreary habitation which exercised a spell upon him, the house of his ancestors, the local habitation to which in future his life must belong, whether he liked it or not.

And certainly its first aspect was far from a cheerful one. The cook, now housekeeper, had made ready for him hastily, preparing for him the best bedroom, the room where Mr. Mountford, now distinguished as the old Squire, had lain in state,

and the library where he had lived through his life. It was all very chilly when he arrived, a dampness clinging to the unoccupied house, and a white mist in all the hollows of the park. He could not help wondering if it was quite safe, or if the humid chill which met him when he entered was not the very thing to make a solitary inhabitant ill, and end his untimely visit in a fever. They did their very best for him in the house. Large fires were lighted, and the little dinner, which was served in a corner of the dining-room, was as dainty as the means of the place would allow. But it would be difficult to imagine anything more dreary than the first evening. He sat among ghosts, thinking he heard Mr. Mountford's step, scarcely capable of restraining his imagination: seeing that spare figure seated in his usual chair, or coming in, with a characteristic half-suspicious inspecting look he had, at the door. The few lamps that were in working order were insufficient to light the place. The passages were all black as night, the windows, when he glanced out at them behind the curtains, showing nothing but a universal blackness, not even the sky or the trees. But if the trees were not visible, they were audible, the wind sighing through them, the rain pattering—a wild concert going on in the gloom. And when the rain ceased it was almost worse. Then there came silence, suspicious and ghostly, broken by a sudden dropping now and then from some overcharged evergreen, the beating of a bough against a window, the hoot of the owl in the woods. After he had swallowed his dinner Heathcote got a book, and sat himself down solemnly to read it. But when he had read a page he stopped to listen to the quiet, and it chilled him over again. The sound of footsteps over the stone pavements, the distant clang of a hansom driving up, the occasional voices that passed his window, all the noises of town, would

have been delightful to him: but instead here he was at Mount, all alone, with miles of park separating him from any living creature, except the maids and outdoor man who had been left in charge.

Next morning it was fine, which mended matters a little. Fine! he said to himself with a little shiver. But he buttoned up his great-coat and went out, bent upon doing his duty. He went to the Rectory first, feeling that at least this would be an oasis in the desert, and found the clergy sitting in two different rooms, over two sermons, which was not a cheerful sight. The Rector was writing his with the calm fluency of thirty years of use and wont; but poor Charley was biting his pen over his manuscript with an incapacity which every successive Sunday seemed to increase rather than diminish. 'My father, he has got into the way of it,' the Curate said in a tone which was half admiring, half despairing. Charley did not feel sure that he himself would ever get into the way of it. He had to take the afternoon service when the audience was a very dispiriting one: even Miss Fanny Woodhead did not come in the afternoon, and the organ was played by the schoolmaster, and the hymns were lugubrious beyond description. As the days began to grow longer, and the winter chill to take ever a deeper and deeper hold, the Curate had felt the mournfulness of the position close round him. When Mount was shut up there was nobody to speak to, nobody to refer to, no variety in his life. A house with only two men in it, in the depths of the country, with no near neighbours, and not a very violent strain of work, and no special relief of interesting pursuits, is seldom a cheerful house. When Charley looked up from his heavy studies and saw Heathcote, he almost upset his table in his jump of delighted welcome. Then there succeeded a moment of alarm. 'Are they all well?—nothing has

happened?' he cried, in sudden panic. 'Nothing at all,' Heathcote said, 'except what concerns myself.' And it amused the stranger to see how relieved his host was by this assurance, and how cheerfully he drew that other chair to the fire to discuss the business which only concerned so secondary a person. Charley, however, was as sympathetic as heart could desire, and ready to be interested in everything. He understood and applauded the new Squire's sentiments in respect to his property and his new responsibilities. 'It is quite true,' the Curate said with a very grave face, 'that it makes the greatest difference to everybody. When Mount is shut up the very sky has less light in it,' said the good fellow, growing poetical. Heathcote had a comprehension of the feeling in his own person which he could not have believed in a little while ago, but he could scarcely help laughing, which was inhuman, at the profound depression in Charley Ashley's face, and which showed in every line of his large, limp figure. His countenance itself was several inches longer than it had been in brighter days.

'I am afraid,' said Heathcote, with a smile, 'that so much opening of Mount as my arrival will make, will not put very much light into the sky.'

'And it is not only the company and the comfort,' said the Curate, 'we feel that dreadfully, my father and I—but there is more than that. If anyone was ill in the village, there was somebody down directly from Mount with beef-tea and wine and whatever was wanted; and if anyone was in trouble, it was always a consolation to tell it to the young ladies, and to hear what they thought. The farmers could not do anything tyrannical, nor the agents be hard upon a tenant—nor anyone,' cried Charley, with enthusiasm, 'maltreat anyone else. There was always a court of appeal at Mount.'

‘My dear fellow,’ said Heathcote, ‘you are thinking of a patriarchal age—you are thinking of something quite obsolete, unmodern, destructive of all political economy.’

‘*That* for political economy!’ said the Curate, snapping his fingers; his spirits were rising—even to have someone to grumble to was a consolation. ‘Political anything is very much out of place in a little country parish. What do our poor labourers know about it? They have so very little at the best of times, how are they to go on when they are ill or in trouble, without some one to give them a lift?’

‘Then they should have more for their work, Ashley. I am afraid it is demoralising that they should be so dependent upon a Squire’s house.’

‘Who is to give them more?’ cried the Curate, hotly. ‘The farmers have not got so very much themselves; and I never said they were dependent; they are not dependent—they are comfortable enough as a matter of fact. Look at the cottages, you will see how respectable they all are. There is no real distress in our parish—thanks,’ he added, veering round very innocently and unconsciously to the other side of the circle, ‘to Mount.’

‘We need not argue the point,’ said Heathcote, amused. ‘I am as sorry as you can be that the ladies will not retain possession. What is it to me? I am not rich enough to do all I would, and I don’t know the people as they did. They will never look up to me as they did to my predecessors. I hope my cousins will return at all events in summer. All the same,’ he added, laughing, ‘I am quite illogical’—like you, he would have said, but forbore. ‘I want them to come back, and yet I feel this infection of duty that you speak of. It seems to me that it must be my business to live here henceforward—though I confess to you I think it will be very dismal, and I don’t know what I shall do.’

'It will be dismal,' said the Curate; his face had lighted up for a moment, then rapidly clouded over again. '*I* don't know what you will do. You that have been always used to a luxurious town life——'

'Not so luxurious—and not so exclusively town,' Heathcote ventured to interpose, feeling a whimsical annoyance at this repetition of his own thoughts.

'——And who don't know the people, nor understand what to do, and what not to do—it takes a long apprenticeship,' said Charley, very gravely. 'You see, an injudicious liberality would be very bad for them—it would pauperise instead of elevating. It is not everybody that knows what is good and what is bad in help. People unaccustomed to the kind of life do more harm than good.'

'You don't give me very much encouragement to settle down on my property and learn how to be a patriarch in my turn,' said Mountford, with a laugh.

'No, I don't,' said the Curate, his face growing longer and longer. The presence of Heathcote Mountford at Mount had smiled upon him for a moment. It would be better than nothing; it would imply some companionship, sympathy more or less, someone to take a walk with occasionally, or to have a talk with, not exclusively parochial; but when the Curate reflected that Heathcote at Mount would altogether do away with the likelihood of 'the family' coming back—that they could not rent the house for the summer, which was a hope he had clung to, if the present owner of it was in possession—Charley at once perceived that the immediate pleasure of a neighbour would be a fatal advantage, and with honest simplicity applied himself to the task of subduing his visitor's new-born enthusiasm. 'You see,' he said, 'it's quite different making a new beginning, knowing nothing about it, from having

been born here, and acquainted with the people all your life.'

'Everybody must have known, however,' said Heathcote, slightly piqued, 'that the property would change hands some time or other, and that great alterations must be made.'

'Oh yes, everybody knew that,' said the Curate, with deadly seriousness; 'but, you see, when you say a thing must happen some time, you never know when it will happen, and it is always a shock when it comes. The old Squire was a hearty man, not at all old for his years. He was not so old as my father, and I hope *he* has a great deal of work left in him yet. And then it was all so sudden; none of us had been able to familiarise ourselves even with the idea that you were going to succeed, when in a moment it was all over, and you *had* succeeded. I don't mean to say that we are not very glad to have you,' said Charley, with a dubious smile, suddenly perceiving the equivocal civility of all he had been saying; 'it is a great deal better than we could have expected. Knowing them and liking them, you can have so much more sympathy with us about them. And as you wish them to come back, if that is possible——'

'Certainly, I do wish them to come back—if it is possible,' said Heathcote, but his countenance, too, grew somewhat long. He would have liked for himself a warmer reception, perhaps. And when he went to see Mr. Ashley, though his welcome was very warm, and though the Rector was absolutely gleeful over his arrival, and confided to him instantly half a dozen matters in which it would be well that he should interest himself at once, still it was not very long before 'they' recurred also to the old man's mind as the chief object of interest. 'Why are they going abroad? it would be far better if they would come home,' said the Rector, who afterwards apolo-

gised, however, with anxious humility. 'I beg your pardon—I beg your pardon with all my heart. I forgot actually that Mount had changed hands. Of course, of course, it is quite natural that they should go abroad. They have no home, so to speak, till they have made up their mind to choose one, and I always think that is one of the hardest things in the world to do. It is a blessing we do not appreciate, Mr. Mountford, to have our home chosen for us and settled beyond our power to change——'

'I don't think Mrs. Mountford dislikes the power of choice,' said Heathcote; 'but so far as I am concerned, you know I should be very thankful if they would continue to occupy their old home.'

'I know, I know. You have spoken most kindly, most generously, exactly as I could have wished you to speak,' said the Rector, patting Heathcote on the shoulder, as if he had been a good boy. Then he took hold of his arm and drew him towards the window, and looked into his eyes. 'It is a delicate question,' he said, 'I know it is a delicate question: but you've been in town, and no doubt you have heard all about it. What is going to happen about Anne?'

'Nothing that I know of,' Heathcote replied briefly. 'Nothing has been said to me.'

'Tchk, tchk. tchk!' said the Rector, with that particular action of the tongue upon the palate, which is so usual an expression of bother, or annoyance, or regret, and so little reducible into words. He shook his head. 'I don't understand these sort of shilly-shally doings,' he said: 'they would have been incomprehensible when I was a young man.'

The same question was repeated by Mr. Loseby, whom next day Heathcote went to see, driving over to Hunston in the Rector's little carriage, with the sober old horse, which was in itself almost a member of the clerical profession. Mr. Loseby received him

with open arms, and much commended the interest which he was showing in his property. 'But Mount will be a dreary place to live in all by yourself,' he said. 'If I were you I would take up my abode at the Rectory, at least till you can have your establishment set on a proper footing. And now that is settled,' said the lawyer (though nothing was settled), 'tell me all about Anne.'

'I know nothing to tell you,' said Heathcote. 'Mr. Douglas is always there——'

'Mr. Douglas is always there! but there is nothing to tell, nothing settled; what does the fellow mean? Do you suppose she is going to forego every advantage, and go dragging on for years to suit his convenience? If you tell me so——'

'But I don't tell you so,' cried Heathcote; 'I tell you nothing—I don't know anything. In short, if you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss the question. I begin to be of your opinion, that I was a fool not to turn up a year sooner. There was nothing to keep me that I am aware of; I might as well have come sooner as later; but I don't know that anyone is to be blamed for that.'

'Ah!' said the old lawyer, rubbing his hands, 'what a settlement that would have made! Anne would have kept her money, and little Rose her proper place and a pretty little fortune, just like herself—and probably would have married William Ashley, a very good sort of young fellow. There would have been some pleasure in arranging a settlement like that. I remember when I drew out the papers for her mother's marriage—that was the salvation of the Mountfords—they were sliding downhill as fast as they could before that; but Miss Roper, who was the first Mrs. St. John Mountford, set all straight. You get the advantage of it more or less, Mr. Heathcote, though the connection is so distant. Even your part of the property is in a very different

condition from what it was when I remember it first. And if you had—not been a fool—but had come in time and tried your chance—— Ah! however, I dare say if it had been so, something would have come in the way all the same; you would not have fancied each other, or something would have happened. But if that fellow thinks that he is to blow hot and cold with Anne——’

‘I don’t like the mere suggestion. Pardon me,’ said Heathcote, ‘I am sure you mean nothing but love and tenderness to my cousin: but I cannot have such a thing suggested. Whatever happens to Anne Mountford, there will be nothing derogatory to her dignity; nothing beneath her own fine character, I am sure of that.’

‘I accept the reproof,’ said Mr. Loseby, with more twinkle than usual in his spectacles, but less power of vision through them. ‘I accept the reproof. What was all heaven and earth about, Heathcote Mountford, that you were left dawdling about that wearisome Vanity Fair that you call the world, instead of coming here a year since, when you were wanted? If there is one thing more than another that wants explaining it is the matrimonial mismanagement of this world. It’s no angel that has the care of that, I’ll answer for it!’ cried the little man with comic indignation. And then he took off his spectacles and wiped them, and grasped Heathcote Mountford by the hand and entreated him to stay to dinner, which, indeed, the recluse of Mount was by no means unwilling to do.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHARLEY INTERFERES.

HEATHCOTE MOUNTFORD, however, notwithstanding the dulness and the dismal weather, and all the imperfections of the incomplete household, continued at Mount. The long blanks of country life, nothing happening from the arrival of one post to another, no stir of life about, only the unbroken stillness of the rain or the sunshine, the good or bad weather, the one tempting him out, the other keeping him within, were all novelties, though of the heavy kind, and gave him a kind of amused-spectator consciousness of the tedium, rather than any suffering from it. He was not so easily affected as many people would be by the circumstances of external life, and knowing that he could at any moment go back to his den at the Albany, he took the much deeper seclusion of Mount as a sort of 'retreat,' in which he could look out upon the before and after, and if he sometimes 'pined for what was not,' yet could do it unenviously and unbitingly, wondering at rather than objecting to the strange misses and blunders of life. Mr. Loseby, who had tutored Anne in her duties, did the same for Heathcote, showing him by what means he could 'take an interest' in the dwellers upon his land, so as to be of some use to them. And he rode about the country with the land-agent, and became aware, and became proud as he became aware, of the character of his own possessions, of the old farmhouses, older than Mount itself, and the old cottages, toppling to their ruin, among which were many that Anne had doomed. Wherever he went he heard of what Miss Anne had done, and settled to do. The women in the condemned cottages told him the improvements she had promised,

and he, in most cases, readily undertook to carry out these promises, notwithstanding his want of means. 'They're doing it at Lilford, where Miss Anne has been and given her orders,' said the women. 'I don't know why there should be differences made. We're as good every bit as the Lilford folks.' 'But you have not got Miss Anne,' said Heathcote. And then there would be an outburst of lamentations, interrupted by anxious questioning. 'Why haven't we got Miss Anne?—is it true as all the money has been left away from her?' Heathcote had a great many questions of this kind to answer, and soon began to feel that he himself was the supposed culprit to whom the estate had been 'left away.' 'I am supposed to be your supplanter,' he wrote to Anne herself, 'and I *feel* your deputy doing your work for you. Dear Lady of Mount, send me your orders. I will carry them out to the best of my ability. I am poor, and not at all clever about the needs of the estate, but I think, don't you think? that the great Mr. Bulstrode, who is so good as to be my agent, is something of a bully, and does not by any means do his spiriting gently. What do you think? You are not an ignoramus, like me.' This letter Anne answered very fully, and it produced a correspondence between them which was a great pleasure to Heathcote, and not only a pleasure, but in some respects a help, too. She approved greatly of his assumption of his natural duties upon his own shoulders, and kindly encouraged him 'not to mind' the bullying of the agent, the boorishness of Farmer Rawlins, and the complaints of the Spriggs. In this matter of the estate Anne felt the advantage of her experience. She wrote to him in a semi-maternal way, understanding that the information she had to give placed her in a position of superiority, while she gave it, at least. Heathcote was infinitely amused by these pretensions; he liked to be schooled

by her, and made her very humble replies; but the burden of all his graver thoughts was still that regret expressed by Mr. Loseby, Why, why had he not made his appearance a year before? But now it was too late.

Thus the winter went on. The Mountfords had gone abroad. They had been in all the places where English families go while their crape is still fresh, to Paris and Cannes, and into Italy, trying, as Mrs. Mountford said, 'the effect of a little change.' And they all liked it, it is needless to deny. They were so unaccustomed to use their wings that the mere feeling of the first flight, the wild freedom and sense of boundless action and power over themselves filled them with pleasure. They were not to come back till the summer was nearly over, going to Switzerland for the hot weather, when Italy became too warm. They had not intended, when they set out, to stay so long, but indeed it was nearly a year from the period of Mr. Mountford's death when they came home. They did not return to Park Lane, nor to any other settled abode, but went to one of the many hotels near Heathcote's chambers, to rest for a few days before they settled what they were to do for the autumn; for it was Mrs. Mountford's desire to go 'abroad' again for the winter, staying only some three months at home. When the little world about Mount heard of this, they were agitated by various feelings—desire to get them back alternating in the minds of the good people with indignation at the idea of their renewed wanderings, which were all put down to the frivolity of Mrs. Mountford; and a continually growing wonder and consternation as to the future of Anne. 'She has no right to keep a poor man hanging on so long, when there can be no possible reason for it; when it would really be an advantage for her to have someone to fall back upon,' Miss Woodhead said, in righteous indignation over

her friend's extraordinary conduct—extraordinary as she thought it. 'Rose has her mother to go with her. And I think poor Mr. Douglas is being treated very badly for my part. They ought to come home here, and stay for the three months, and get the marriage over, among their own people.' Fanny Woodhead was considered through all the three adjacent parishes to be a person of great judgment, and the Rector, for one, was very much impressed with this suggestion. 'I think Fanny's idea should be acted upon. I think it certainly should be acted on,' he said. 'The year's mourning for her father will be over, if that is what they are waiting for—and look at all the correspondence she has, and the trouble. She wants somebody to help her. Someone should certainly suggest to Anne that it would be a right thing to follow Fanny Woodhead's advice.'

Heathcote, who, though he had allowed himself a month of the season, was back again in Mount, with a modest household gathered round him, and every indication of a man 'settling down,' concurred in this counsel, so far as to write, urging very warmly that Mount should be their head-quarters while they remained in England. Mr. Loseby was of opinion that the match was one which never would come off at all, an idea which moved several bosoms with an unusual tremor. There was a great deal of agitation altogether on the subject among the little circle, which felt that the concerns of the Mountfords were more or less concerns of their own; and when it was known that Charley Ashley, who was absent on his yearly holiday, was to see the ladies on his way through London, there was a general impression that something would come of it—that he would be able to set their duty before them, or to expedite the settlement of affairs in one way or another. The Curate himself said nothing to any-

one, but he had a very serious purpose in his mind. He it was who had introduced these two to each other; his friendship had been the link which had connected Douglas—so far as affairs had yet gone, very disastrously—with the woman who had been the adoration of poor Charley's own life. He had resigned her, having neither hopes nor rights to resign, to his friend, with a generous abandonment, and had been loyal to Cosmo as to Anne, though at the cost of no little suffering to himself. But, if it were possible that Anne herself was being neglected, then Charley felt that he had a right to a word in the matter. He was experimenting sadly in French seaside amusements with his brother at Boulogne, when the ladies returned to England. Charley and Willie were neither of them great in French. They had begun by thinking all the humours of the bathing place 'fun,' and laughing mightily at the men in their bathing dresses, and feeling scandalised at their presence among the ladies; but, after a few days, they had become very much bored, and felt the drawback of having 'nothing to do;' so that, when they heard that the Mountfords had crossed the Channel and were in London, the two young men made haste to follow. It was the end of July when everybody was rushing out of town, and only a small sprinkling of semi-fashionable persons were to be seen in the scorched and baked parks. The Mountfords were understood to be in town only for a few days. It was all that any lady who respected herself could imagine possible at this time of the year.

'I suppose they'll be changed,' Willie said to his brother, as they made their way to the hotel. 'I have never seen them since all these changes came about; that is, I have never seen Rose. I suppose Rose won't be Rose now, to me at least. It is rather funny that such a tremendous change should come about between two times of seeing a person whom

you have known all your life.' By 'rather funny' Willie meant something much the reverse of amusing: but that is the way of English youth. He, too, had entertained his little dreams, which had been of a more substantial character than his brother's; for Willie was destined for the bar, and had, or believed himself to have, chances much superior to those of a country clergyman. And according to the original disposition of Mr. St. John Mountford's affairs, a rising young fellow at the bar, with Willie Ashley's hopes and connections, would have been no very bad match for little Rose. This it was that made him feel it was 'funny.' But still his heart was not gone together in one great sweep out of his breast, like Charley's. And he went to see his old friends with a little quickening of his pulse, yet a composed determination 'to see if it was any use.' If it seemed to him that there was still an opening, Willie was not afraid of Rose's fortune, and did not hesitate to form ulterior plans; and he stood on this great vantage ground that, if he found it was not 'any use,' he had no intention of breaking his heart.

When they went in, however, to the hotel sitting-room in which the Mountfords were, they found Rose and her mother with their bonnets on, ready to go out, and there were but a few minutes for conversation. Rose was grown and developed so that her old adorer scarcely recognised her for the first minute. She was in a white dress, profusely trimmed with black, and made in a fashion to which the young men were unaccustomed, the latest Parisian fashion, which they did not understand, indeed, but which roused all their English conservatism of feeling, as much as if they had understood it. 'Oh, how nice of you to come to see us!' Rose cried. 'Are you really passing through London, and were you at Boulogne when we came through? I never

could have imagined you in France, either the one or the other. How did you get on with the talking? You could not have any fun in a place unless you understood what people were saying. Mamma, I don't think we ought to wait for Mr. Douglas; it is getting so late.'

'Here is Mr. Douglas,' said Mrs. Mountford; 'he is always punctual. Anne is not going with us; she has so much to do—there is quite a packet of letters from Mr. Loseby. If you would rather be let off going with us, Mr. Douglas, you have only to say so; I am sure we can do very well by ourselves.'

But at this suggestion Rose pouted, a change of expression which was not lost upon the anxious spectators.

'I came for the express purpose of going with you,' said Cosmo; 'why should I be turned off now?'

'Oh, I only thought that because of Anne——; but of course you will see Anne after. Will you all, like good people, come back and dine, as we are going out now? No, Charley, I will not, indeed, take any refusal. I want to hear all about Mount, dear Mount—and what Heathcote Mountford is doing. Anne wishes us to go to Hunston; but I don't know that I should like to be so near without being at Mount.'

'Is Anne too busy to see us now? I should just like to say how d'you do.'

'Oh, if you will wait a little, I don't doubt that you will see her. But I am sure you will excuse us now, as we had fixed to go out. We shall see you this evening. Mind you are here by seven o'clock,' cried Mrs. Mountford, shaking her fingers at them in an airy way which she had learned 'abroad.' And Rose said, as they went out, 'Yes, do come; I want to hear all about Mount.' About two minutes

after they left the room Anne came in. She had not turned into a spider or wasp, like Rose in her Paris costume, but she was much changed. She no longer carried her head high, but had got a habit of bowing it slightly, which made a curious difference in her appearance. She was like a tall flower bent by the winds, bowing before them; she was more pale than she used to be; and to Charley it seemed that there was an inquiry in her eyes, which first cast one glance round, as if asking something, before they turned with a little gleam of pleasure to the strangers.

‘You here?’ Anne said. ‘How glad I am to see you! When did you come, and where are you staying? I am so sorry that mamma and Rosé have gone out; but you must come back and see them: or will you wait? They will soon be back;’ and once more she threw a glance round, investigating—as if some one might be hiding somewhere, Willie said. But his brother knew better. Charley felt that there was the bewilderment of wonder in her eyes, and felt that it must be a new experience to her that Cosmo should not wait to see her. For a moment the light seemed to fade in her face, then came back: and she sat down and talked with a subdued sweetness that went to their hearts. ‘Not to Mount,’ she said; ‘Heathcote is very kind, but I don’t think I will go to Mount. To Hunston rather—where we can see everybody all the same.’

‘What is the matter with Anne?’ Willie Ashley asked, wondering, when they came away. ‘It can’t be because she has lost her money. She has no more spirit left in her. She has not a laugh left in her. What is the cause of it all?’ But the Curate made no answer. He set his teeth, and he said not a word. There was very little to be got out of him all that day. He went gloomily about with his brother, turning Willie’s holiday into a some-

what poor sort of merry-making. And when they went to dinner with the Mountfords at night, Charley's usual taciturnity was so much aggravated that he scarcely could be said to talk at all. But the dinner was gay enough. Rose, it seemed to young Ashley, who had his private reasons for being critical, 'kept it up' with Douglas in a way which was not at all pleasant. They had been together all the afternoon, and had all sorts of little recollections in common. Anne was much less subdued than in the morning, and talked like her old self, yet with a difference. It was when the party broke up, however, that Willie Ashley felt himself most ill-used. He was left entirely out in the cold by his brother, who said to him briefly, 'I am going home with Douglas,' and threw him on his own devices. If it had not been that some faint guess crossed the younger brother's mind as to Charley's meaning, he would have felt himself very badly used.

The Curate put his arm within his friend's. It was somewhat against the grain, for he did not feel so amicable as he looked. 'I am coming back with you,' he said. 'We have not had a talk for so long. I want to know what you've been after all this long while.'

'Very glad of a talk,' said Douglas, but neither was he quite as much gratified as he professed to be; 'but as for coming back with me, I don't know where that is to be, for I am going to the club.'

'I'll walk with you there,' said Charley. However, after this announcement Cosmo changed his mind: he saw that there was gravity in the Curate's intentions, and turned his steps towards his rooms. He had not been expected there, and the lamp was not lighted, nor anything ready for him; and there was a little stumbling in the dark and ringing of bells before they got settled comfortably to their *tête-à-tête*. Charley seated himself in a chair by the

table while this was going on, and when lights came he was discovered there as in a scene in a theatre, heavy and dark in his black clothes, and the pale desperation with which he was addressing himself to his task.

‘Douglas,’ he said, ‘for a long time I have wanted to speak to you——’

‘Speak away,’ said the other; ‘but have a pipe to assist your utterance, Charley. You never could talk without your pipe.’

The Curate put away the offered luxury with a determined hand. How much easier, how much pleasanter it would have been to accept it, to veil his purpose with the friendly nothings of conversation, and thus perhaps delude his friend into disclosures without affronting him by a solemn demand! That would have been very well had Charley had any confidence in his own powers—but he had not, and he put the temptation away from him. ‘No, thank you, Douglas,’ he said, ‘what I want to say is something which you may think very interfering and impertinent. Do you remember a year ago when you were at the Rectory and we had a talk—one very wet night?’

‘Perfectly. You were sulky because you thought I had cut you out; but you always were the best of fellows, Charley——’

‘Don’t talk of it like that. You might have taken my life blood from me after that, and I shouldn’t have minded. That’s a figure of speech. I mean that I gave up to you then what wasn’t mine to give, what you had got without any help from me. You know what I mean. If you think I didn’t mind, that was a mistake. A great many things have happened since then, and some things have not happened that looked as if they ought to have done so. You made use of me after that, and I was glad enough to be of use. I want to ask

you one question now, Douglas. I don't say that you'll like to be questioned by me——'

'No,' said Cosmo, 'a man does not like to be questioned by another man who has no particular right to interfere: for I don't pretend not to understand what you mean.'

'No: you can't but understand what I mean. All of us, down about Mount, take a great interest—there's never a meeting in the county of any kind but questions are always asked. As for my father, he is excited on the subject. He cannot keep quiet. Will you tell me for his satisfaction and my own, what is going to come of it? is anything going to come of it? I think that, as old friends, and mixed up as I have been all through, I have a right to inquire.'

'You mean,' said Cosmo, coolly knocking a pipe upon the mantelpiece with his back turned to the questioner, whose voice was broken with emotion, and who was grasping the table nervously all the while he spoke—'you mean, is marriage going to come of it? at least, I suppose that is what you mean.'

The Curate replied by a sort of inarticulate gurgle in his throat, an assent which excitement prevented from forming itself into words.

'Well!' said the other. He took his time to everything he did, filled the pipe aforesaid, lighted it with various long-drawn puffs, and finally seated himself at the opposite side of the dark fireplace, over which the candles on the mantelpiece threw an additional shadow. 'Well! it is no such simple matter as you seem to think.'

'I never said it was a simple matter; and yet when one thinks that there are other men,' cried the Curate, with momentary vehemence, 'who would give their heads——'

Douglas replied to this outburst with a momen-

tary laugh, which, if he had but known it, as nearly gave him over to punishment as any foolish step he ever took in his life. Fortunately for him it was very short, and in reality more a laugh of excitement than of mirth.

‘Oh, there’s more than one, is there?’ he said. ‘Look here, Charley, I might refuse point-blank to answer your question. I should have a perfect right. It is not the sort of thing that one man asks another in a general way.’

The Curate did not make any reply, and after a moment Douglas continued—

‘But I won’t. I understand your motives, if you don’t understand mine. You think I am shilly-shallying, that I ought to fulfil my engagement, that I am keeping Anne hanging on.’

‘Don’t name any names,’ cried Ashley, hoarsely.

‘I don’t know how I can give you an answer without naming names: but I’ll try to please you. Look here, it is not such an easy matter, plain-sailing and straightforward as you think. When I formed that engagement I was—well, just what I am now—a poor devil of a barrister, not long called, with very little money, and not much to do. But, then, *she* was rich. Did you make a remark?’

Charley had stirred unconsciously, with a movement of indignant fury, which he was unable altogether to restrain. But he made no answer, and Douglas continued with a quickened and somewhat excited tone—

‘I hope you don’t suppose that I mean to say that had anything to do with the engagement. Stop! yes, it had. I should not have ventured to say a word about my feelings to a poor girl. I should have taken myself off as soon as they became too much for me. I don’t hide the truth from you, and I am not ashamed of it. To thrust myself and

her into trouble on my present income is what I never would have thought of. Well, you know all that happened as well as I do. I entreated her not to be rash, I begged her to throw me over, not so much as to think of me when her father objected. She paid no attention. I don't blame her——'

'Blame her!'

'Those were the words I used. I don't blame her. She knew nothing about poverty. She was not afraid of it: it was rather a sort of excitement to her, as they say a revolution was to the French princesses. She laughed at it, and defied her father. If you think I liked that, or encouraged that, it is a mistake; but what could I do? And what am I to do now? Can I bring her here, do you think? What can I do with her? I am not well enough off to marry. I should never have dreamt of such a thing on my own account. If you could show me a way out of it, I should be very thankful. As for working one's self into fame and fortune and all that kind of thing, you know a little what mere romance it is. Some fellows do it; but they don't marry to begin with. I am almost glad you interviewed me to get this all out. What am I to do? I know no more than you can tell me. I have got the character of playing fast and loose, of behaving badly to a girl whom I love and respect; for I do love and respect her, mind you, whatever you and your belongings may think or say.'

'You could not well help yourself, so far as I can see,' said the Curate hotly.

'That is all you know. If you were in my place and knew the false position into which I have been brought, the expectations I have been supposed to raise, the reluctance I have seemed to show in carrying them out—by Jove! if you could only feel as I do all the miseries of my position, unable to stir a step one way or another——'

‘I know men who would give their heads to stand in your position —’

‘And what would they do in it?’ asked Douglas, pulling ineffectually at the pipe, which had long gone out. ‘Say yourself, for example; you are totally different—you have got your house and your settled income, and you know what is before you.’

‘I can’t discuss it in this way. Do you imagine that I have as much to spend, to use your own argument,’ cried the Curate, ‘as you have here?’

‘It is quite different,’ Douglas said. Then he added, with a sort of dogged determination, ‘I am getting on. I think I am getting the ball at my foot; but to marry at present would be destruction—and to her still more than to me.’

‘Then the short and the long is——’

‘The short and the long is exactly what I have told you. You may tell her yourself, if you please. Whatever love in a cottage may be, love in chambers is impossible. With her fortune we could have married, and it would have helped me on. Without it, such a thing would be madness, ruin to me and to her too.’

Charley rose up, stumbling to his feet. ‘This is all you have got to say?’ he said.

‘Yes, that is all I have got to say; and, to tell the truth, I think it is wonderfully good of me to say it, and not to show you politely to the door; but we are old friends, and you are her old friend——’

‘Good-night, Douglas,’ the Curate said, abruptly. He did not offer his friend his hand, but went out bewildered, stumbling down the stairs and out at the door. This was what he had yielded up all his hopes (but he never had any hopes) for! this was what Anne had selected out of the world. He did not go back to his hotel, but took a long walk round and round the parks in the dismal lamplight, seeing

many a dismal scene. It was almost morning when his brother, utterly surprised and alarmed, heard him come in at last.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RECTOR SATISFIED.

‘No, I did not get any satisfaction; I can’t say that he gave me any satisfaction,’ the Curate said.

He had put down his pipe out of deference to his father, who had come into the little den inhabited by Charley the morning after his return. Mr. Ashley’s own study was a refined and comfortable place, as became the study of a dignified clergyman; but his son had a little three-cornered room, full of pipes and papers, the despair of every housemaid that ever came into the house. Charley had felt himself more than usually that morning in need of the solace that his pipe could give. He had returned home late the evening before, and he had already had great discussions with his brother Willie as to Rose Mountford, whom Willie on a second interview had pronounced ‘just as nice as ever,’ but whom the elder had begun to regard with absolute disgust. Willie had gone off to Hunston to execute a commission which in reality was from Anne, and which the Curate had thought might have been committed to himself—to inquire into the resources of the ‘Black Bull,’ where old Saymore had now for some time been landlord, and to find out whether the whole party could be accommodated there. The Curate had lighted his pipe when his brother went off on this mission. He wanted it, poor fellow! He sat by the open window with a book upon the ledge, smoking out into the garden; the view was limited, a hedgerow or two in the distance, breaking the flatness of the fields, a big old walnut tree in

front shutting in one side, a clump of evergreens on the other. What he was reading was only a railway novel picked up in mere listlessness; he pitched it away into a large untidy waste-paper basket, and put down his pipe when his father came in. The Rector had not been used in his youth to such disorderly ways, and he did not like smoke.

‘No, sir, no satisfaction; the reverse of that—and yet, perhaps, there is something to be said too on his side,’ the Curate said.

‘Something on his side! I don’t know what you mean,’ cried his father. ‘When I was a young fellow, to behave in this sort of way was disgrace to an honourable man. That is to say, no honourable man would have been guilty of it. Your word was your word, and at any cost it had to be kept.’

‘Father,’ said Charley with unusual energy, ‘it seems to me that the most unbearable point of all this is—that you and I should venture to talk of any fellow, confound him! keeping his word and behaving honourably to—— That’s what I can’t put up with, for my part.’

‘You are quite right,’ said the Rector, abashed for the moment. And then he added, pettishly, ‘but what can we do? We must use the common words, even though Anne is the subject. Charley, there is nobody so near a brother to her as you are, nor a father as I.’

‘Yes, I suppose I’m like a brother,’ the Curate said with a sigh.

‘Then tell me exactly what this fellow said.’

Mr. Ashley was wound up for immediate action. Perhaps the increased tedium of life since the departure of ‘the family’ from Mount had made him more willing, now when it seemed to have come to a climax, for an excitement of any kind.

‘It isn’t what she has a right to,’ said the Curate,

painfully impartial when he had told his tale. 'She—ought to be received like a blessing wherever she goes. We know that better than anyone: but I don't say that Douglas doesn't know it too——'

'Don't let me hear the fellow's name!'

'That's very true, sir,' said the Curate; 'but, after all, when you come to think of it! Perhaps, now-a-days, with all our artificial arrangements, you know—— At least, that's what people say. He'd be bringing her to poverty to please himself. He'd be taking her out of her own sphere. She doesn't know what poverty means, that's what he says—and she laughs at it. How can he bring her into trouble which she doesn't understand—that's what he says.'

'He's a fool, and a coward, and an idiot, and perhaps a knave, for anything I can tell!' cried the Rector in distinct volleys. Then he cried sharply with staccato distinctness, 'I shall go to town to-night.'

'To town! to-night? I don't see what *you* could do, sir!' said the Curate, slightly wounded, with an injured emphasis on the pronoun, as much as to say, if *I* could not do anything, how should you? But the Rector shook off this protest with a gesture of impatience, and went away, leaving no further ground for remonstrance. It was a great surprise to the village generally to hear that he was going away. Willie Ashley heard of it before he could get back from Hunston; and Heathcote Mountford in the depths of the library which, the only part of the house he had interfered with, he was now busy transforming. 'The Rector is going to London!' 'It has something to do with Anne and her affairs, take my word for it!' cried Fanny Woodhead, who was so clear-sighted, 'and high time that somebody should interfere!'

The Rector got in very late, which, as everybody

knows, is the drawback of that afternoon train. You get in so late that it is almost like a night journey; and he was not so early next morning as was common to him. There was no reason why he should be early. He sent a note to Anne as soon as he was up to ask her to see him privately, and about eleven o'clock sallied forth on his mission. Mr. Ashley had come to town not as a peacemaker, but, as it were, with a sword of indignation in his hand. He was half angry with the peaceful sunshine and the soft warmth of the morning. It was not yet hot in the shady streets, and little carts of flowers were being driven about, and all the vulgar sounds softened by the genial air. London was out of town, and there was an air of grateful languor about everything; few carriages about the street, but perpetual cabs loaded with luggage—pleasure and health for those who were going away, a little more room and rest for those who were remaining.

But the Rector was not in a humour to see the best side of anything. He marched along angrily, encouraging himself to be remorseless, not to mind what Anne might say, but if she pleaded for her lover, if she clung to the fellow, determining to have no mercy upon her. The best of women were such fools in this respect. They would not be righted by their friends; they would prefer to suffer, and defend a worthless fellow, so to speak, to the last drop of their blood. But all the same, though the Rector was so angry and so determined, he was also a little afraid. He did not know how Anne would take his interference. She was not the sort of girl whom the oldest friend could dictate to—to whom he could say ‘Do this,’ with any confidence that she would do it. His breath came quick and his heart beat now that the moment approached, but ‘There is nobody so near a father to her as I am,’ he said to himself, and this gave him courage. Anne

received him in a little sitting-room which was reserved to herself. She was sitting there among her papers waiting for him, and when he entered came forward quickly, holding out her hands, with some anxiety in her face. 'Something has happened?' she said, she too with a little catching of her breath.

'No—nothing, my dear, nothing to alarm you; I mean really nothing at all, Anne—only I wanted to speak to you——'

She put him into a comfortable chair, and drew her own close to him, smiling, though still a little pale. 'Then it is all pleasure,' she said, 'if it is not to be pain. What a long time it is since I have seen you! but we are going to Hunston, where we shall be quite within reach. All the same you look anxious, dear Mr. Ashley—you were going to speak to me——'

'About your own affairs, my dear child,' he said.

'Ah!' a flush came over her face, then she grew paler than before. 'Now I know why you look so anxious,' she said, with a faint smile. 'If it is only about me, however, we will face it steadily, whatever it is——'

'Anne,' cried the Rector, taking both her hands in his—'Anne, my dear child! I have loved you as if you had been my own all your life.'

She thanked him with her eyes, in which there was the ghost of a melancholy smile, but did not speak.

'And I can't bear to see you slighted, my dear. You *are* slighted, Anne, you whom we all think too good for a king. It has been growing more and more intolerable to me as the months have gone by. I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it any longer. I have come to say to yourself that it is not possible, that it must not go on, that it cannot be.'

Anne gave his hands which held hers a quick pressure. 'Thank you,' she said, 'dear Mr. Ashley,

for coming to *me*. If you had gone to anyone else I could not have borne it: but say whatever you will to me.'

Then he got up, his excitement growing. 'Anne, this man stands aloof. Possessing your love, my dear, and your promise, he has—not claimed either one or the other. He has let you go abroad, he has let you come home, he is letting you leave London without coming to any decision or taking the place he ought to take by your side. Anne, hear me out; you have a difficult position, my dear; you have a great deal to do; it would be an advantage to you to have someone to act for you, to stand by you, to help you.'

'So far as that goes,' she said with a pained smile—'no: I don't think there is very much need of that.'

'Listen to me, my dear. Rose has her mother; she does not want your personal care, so that is no excuse; and all that you have to do makes it more expedient that you should have help and support. None of us but would give you that help and support, oh! so gladly, Anne! But there is one whom you have chosen, by means of whom it is that you are in this position—and he holds back. He does not rush to your side imprudently, impatiently, as he ought. What sort of a man is it that thinks of prudence in such circumstances? He lets you stand alone and work alone: and he is letting you go away, leave the place where he is, without settling your future, without coming to any conclusion—without even a time indicated. Oh, I have no patience with it—I cannot away with it!' said the Rector, throwing up his arms, 'it is more than I can put up with. And that you should be subjected to this, Anne!'

Perhaps she had never been subjected to so hard an ordeal as now. She sat with her hands tightly

clasped on the table, her lips painfully smiling, a dark dew of pain in her eyes—hearing her own humiliation, her downfall from the heights of worship and service where she had been placed all her life by those who loved her, recounted like a well-known history. She thought it had been all secret to herself, that nobody had known of the wondering discoveries, the bitter findings out, the confusion of all her ideas, as one thing after another became clear to her. It was not all clear to her yet; she had found out some things, but not all. And that all should be clear as daylight to others, to the friends whom she had hoped knew nothing about it! this knowledge transfixed Anne like a sword. Fiery arrows had struck into her before, winged and blazing, but now it was all one great burning scorching wound. She held her hands clasped tight to keep herself still. She would not writhe at least upon the sword that was through her, she said to herself, and upon her mouth there was the little contortion of a smile. Was it to try and make it credible that she did not believe what he was saying, or that she did not feel it, that she kept that smile?—or had it got frozen upon her lips so that the ghost could not pass away?

When he stopped at last, half frightened by his own vehemence, and alarmed at her calm, Anne was some time without making any reply. At last she said, speaking with some difficulty, her lips being dry: ‘Mr. Ashley, some of what you say is true.’

‘Some—oh, my dear, my dear, it is all true—don’t lay that flattering unction to your soul. Once you have looked at it calmly, dispassionately——’

Here Anne broke forth into a little laugh, which made Mr. Ashley hold out his hands in eager deprecation, ‘Oh, don’t, my darling, don’t, don’t!’

‘No,’ she said, ‘no, no—I will not laugh—that would be too much. Am I so dispassionate, do you

think? Able to judge calmly, though the case is my own——’

‘Yes, Anne,’ cried the old Rector; his feelings were too much for him—he broke down and sobbed like a woman. ‘Yes, my beautiful Anne, my dearest child! you are capable of it—you are capable of everything that is heroic. Would I have ventured to come to you but for that? You are capable of everything, my dear.’

Anne waited a little longer, quite silently, holding her hands clasped tight. One thing she was not capable of, and that was to stand up. Whatever else she might be able to do, she could not do that. She said under her breath, ‘Wait for a moment,’ and then, when she had got command of herself, rose slowly and went to the table on which her papers were. There she hesitated, taking a letter out of the blotting-book—but after a moment’s pause brought it to him. ‘I did not think I should ever show—a letter—to a third person,’ she said with confused utterance. Then she went back to her table, and sat down and began to move with her hands among the papers, taking up one and laying down another. The Rector threw himself into the nearest chair and began to read.

‘Dear Cosmo,—You will think it strange to get a long letter from me, when we met this morning; and yet, perhaps, you will not think it strange—you will know.

‘In the first place let me say that there are a great many things which it will not be needful to put on paper, which you and I will understand without words. We understand—that things have not been lately as they were some time ago. It is nobody’s fault; things change—that is all about it. One does not always feel the same, and we must be thankful that there is no absolute necessity that we

should feel the same ; we have still the full freedom of our lives, both I and you.

‘This being the case, I think I should say to you that it seems to me we have made a mistake. You would naturally have a delicacy in saying it, but women have a privilege in this respect, and therefore I can take the initiative. We were too hasty, I fear ; or else there were circumstances existing then which do not exist now, and which made the bond between us more practicable, more easily to be realised. This is where it fails now. It may be just the same in idea, but it has ceased to be possible to bring anything practicable out of it ; the effort would involve much, more than we are willing to give, perhaps more—I speak brutally, as the French say—than it is worth.

‘In these uncertainties I put it to you whether it would not be better for us in great friendship and regret to shake hands and—part ? It is not a pleasant word, but there are things which are much less pleasant than any word can be, and those we must avoid at all hazards. I do not think that your present life and my present life could amalgamate anyhow—could they ? And the future is so hazy, so doubtful, with so little in it that we can rely upon—the possibilities might alter, in our favour, or against us, but no one can tell, and most probably any change would be disadvantageous. On the other hand, your life, as at present arranged, suits you very well, and my life suits me. There seems no reason why we should make ourselves uncomfortable, is there ? by continuing, at the cost of much inconvenience, to contemplate changes which we do not very much desire, and which would be a very doubtful advantage if they were made.

‘This being the case—and I think, however unwilling you may be to admit it, to start with, that if you ask yourself deep down in the depths of your

heart, you will find that the same doubts and questions, which have been agitating my mind, have been in yours, too—and that there is only one answer to them—don't you think my suggestion is the best? Probably it will not be pleasant to either of us. There will be the talk and the wonderings of our friends, but what do these matter?—and what is far worse, a great crying out of our own recollections and imaginations against such a severance—but these, *I feel sure*, lie all on the surface, and if we are brave and decide upon it at once, will last as short a time as—most other feelings last in this world.

‘If you agree with me, send me just three words to say so—or six, or indeed any number of words—but don't let us enter into explanations. Without anything more said, we both understand.

‘Your true friend in all circumstances,

‘ANNE.’

There are some names which are regal in their mere simplicity of a few letters. This signature seemed like Anne Princess, or Anne Queen to the eyes of the old man who read it. He sat with the letter in his hands for some time after he had read to the end, not able to trust his voice or even his old eyes by any sudden movement. The writer all this time sat at her table moving about the papers. Some of the business letters which were lying there she read over. One little note she wrote a confused reply to, which had to be torn up afterwards. She waited—but not with any tremor—with a still sort of aching deep down in her heart, which seemed to answer instead of beating. How is it that there is so often actual pain and heaviness where the heart lies, to justify all our metaphorical references to it? The brain does not ache when our hearts are sore; and yet they say our brains are all we have to feel with. Why should it be so true, so true, to say

that one's heart is heavy? Anne asked herself this question vaguely as she sat so quietly moving about her papers. Her head was as clear as yours or mine, but her heart—which, poor thing, means nothing but a bit of hydraulic machinery, and was pumping away just as usual—lay heavy in her bosom like a lump of lead.

'My dear child, my dear child!' the old Rector said at length, rising up hastily and stumbling towards her, his eyes dim with tears, not seeing his way. The circumstances were far too serious for his usual exclamation of 'God bless my soul!' which, being such a good wish, was more cheerful than the occasion required.

'Do you think that is sufficient?' said Anne, with a faint smile. 'You see I am not ignorant of the foundations. Do you think that will do?'

'My dear, my dear!' Mr. Ashley said. He did not seem capable of saying any more.

With that Anne, feeling very like a woman at the stake—as if she were tied to her chair, at least, and found the ropes, though they cut her, some support—took the letter out of his hand and put it into an envelope, and directed it very steadily to 'Cosmo Douglas, Esq., Middle Temple.' 'There, that is over,' she said. The ropes were cutting, but certainly they were a support. The papers before her were all mixed up and swimming about, but yet she could see the envelope—four-square—an accomplished thing, settled and done with: as perhaps she thought her life too also was.

'Anne,' said the old Rector, in his trembling voice, 'my dear! I know one far more worthy of you, who would give all the world to know that he might hope——'

She put out one hand and pushed herself away from the table. The giddiness went off, and the

paper again became perceptible before her. 'You don't suppose that I—want anything to do with any man?' she said, with an indignant break in her voice.

'No, my dear; of course you do not. It would not be in nature if you did not scorn and turn from—— But, Anne,' said the old Rector, 'life will go on, do what you will to stand still. You cannot stand still, whatever you do. You will have to walk the same path as those that have gone before you. You need never marry at all, you will say. But after a while, when time has had its usual effect, and your grief is calmed and your mind matured, you will do like others that have gone before you. Do not scorn what I say. You are only twenty-two when all is done, and life is long, and the path is very dreary when you walk by yourself and there is no one with you on the way.'

Anne did not say anything. It was her policy and her safety not to say anything. She had come to herself. But the past time had been one of great struggle and trial, and she was worn out by it. After a while Mr. Ashley came to see that the words of wisdom he was speaking fell upon deaf ears. He talked a great deal, and there was much wisdom and experience and the soundest good sense in what he said, only it dropped half-way, as it were, on the wing, on the way to her, and never got to Anne.

He went away much subdued, just as a servant from the hotel came to get the letters for the post. Then the Rector left Anne, and went to the other part of the house to pay his respects to the other ladies. They had been out all the morning, and now had come back to luncheon.

'Mr. Douglas is always so good,' Mrs. Mountford said. 'Fortunately it is the long vacation; but I suppose you know that; and he can give us almost all his time, which is so good of him. It was only

the afternoons in the winter that we could have. And he tells Rose everything. I tell her Mr. Douglas is more use to her than any governess she ever had.'

'If Anne never of your parties?' the Rector said.

'Oh, Anne! she is always busy about something, or else she says she is busy. I am sure she need not shut herself up as she does. I wish you would speak to her. You are an old friend, and always had a great influence over Anne. She is getting really morose—quite morose—if you will take my opinion,' said Mrs. Mountford. Rose was almost as emphatic. 'I don't know what she has against me. I cannot seal myself up as she does, can I, Mr. Ashley? No, she will never come with us. It is so tiresome; but I suppose when we are in the country, which she is always so fond of, that things will change.'

Just then Anne came into the room softly, in her usual guise. Mr. Ashley looked at her half in alarm. She had managed to dismiss from her voice and manner every vestige of agitation. What practice she must have had, the Rector said to himself, to be able to do it.

'I hope you have had a pleasant morning,' she said. She did not avoid Cosmo, but gave him her hand as simply as to the rest. She addressed him little, but still did not hesitate to address him, and once the Rector perceived her looking at him un-awares with eyes full of the deepest compassion. Why was she so pitiful? Cosmo did not seem to like the look. He was wistful and anxious. Already there was something, a warning of evil, in the air.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FALLEN FROM HER HIGH ESTATE.

THE 'Black Bull' at Hunston is one of those old inns which have been superseded, wherever it is practicable, by new ones, and which are in consequence eagerly resorted to by enlightened persons, wherever they are to be found; but there was no body in Hunston, beyond the ordinary little country-town visitors, to appreciate its comfortable old rooms, old furniture, and old ways. When there was a county ball, the county people who had daughters engaged rooms in it occasionally, and the officers coming from Scarlett-town filled up all the corners. But county balls were rare occurrences, and there had not been yet under the *régime* of old Saymore a single instance of exceptional gaiety or fulness. So that, though it was highly respectable, and the position of landlord one of ease and dignity, the profits had been as yet limited. Saymore himself, however, in the spotless perfection of costume which he had so long kept up at Mount, and with his turn for artistic arrangements, and general humble following of the 'fads' of his young ladies, was in himself a model of a master for a Queen Anne house (though not in the least what the prototype of that character would have been), and was in a fair way to make his house everything which a house of that period ought to be. And though Keziah, in the most fashionable of nineteenth-century dresses, was a decided anachronism, yet her little face was pleasant to the travellers arriving hot and dusty on an August evening, and finding in those two well-known figures a something of home which went to their hearts. To see Saymore at the carriage door made Mrs. Mountford put her handkerchief to her eyes, a practice which

she had given up for at least six months past. And, to compare small things with great, when Keziah showed them to their rooms, notwithstanding the pride of proprietorship with which she led the way, the sight of Anne and Rose had a still greater effect upon little Mrs. Saymore: Rose especially, in her Paris dress, with a waist like nothing at all—whereas to see Keziah, such a figure! She cried, then dried her tears, and recollected the proud advances in experience and dignity she had made, and her responsibilities as head of a house, and all her plate and linen, and her hopes: so much had she gone through, while with them everything was just the same: thus pride on one side in her own second chapter of life, and envy on the other of the freedom of their untouched lives produced a great commotion in her. ‘Mr. Saymore and me, we thought this would be the nicest for Miss Anne, and I put you here, Miss Rose, next to your mamma. Oh, yes, I am very comfortable. I have everything as I wish for. Mr. Saymore don’t deny me nothing—he’d buy me twice as many things as I want, if I’d let him. How nice you look, Miss Rose, just the same, only nicer; and such style! Is that the last fashion? It makes her look just nothing at all, don’t it, Miss Anne? Oh, when we was all at Mount, how we’d have copied it, and twisted it, and changed it to look something the same, and not the least the same—but I’ve got to dress up to forty and look as old as I can now.’

Saymore came into the sitting-room after them with his best bow, and that noiseless step, and those ingratiating manners which had made him the best of butlers. ‘I have nothing to find fault with, ma’am,’ he said. ‘I’ve been very well received, very well received. Gentlemen as remembered me at Mount has been very kind. Mr. Loseby, he has many a little luncheon here. “I’ll not bother my

old house-keeper," he says, when he has gentlemen come sudden. "I'll just step over to my old friend Saymore. Saymore knows how to send up a nice little lunch, and he knows a good glass of wine when he sees it." That's exactly what Mr. Loseby said, no more than three days ago. But business is quiet,' Saymore added. 'I don't complain, but things is quiet; we'd be the better, ma'am, of a little more stir here.'

'But I hope you find everything comfortable—at home, Saymore?' said his former mistress. 'You know I always told you it was an experiment. I hope you find everything comfortable at home.'

'Meaning Mrs. Saymore, ma'am?' replied the landlord of the 'Black Bull,' with dignity. 'I'm very glad to say as she have given me and everybody great satisfaction. She is young, but that is a fault, as I made so bold as to observe to you, ma'am, on a previous occasion, a fault as is sure to mend. I've never repented what I did when I married. She's as nice as possible downstairs, but never too nice—giving herself no airs: but keeping her own place. She's given me every satisfaction,' said Saymore, with much solemnity. In the meantime Keziah was giving her report on the other side of the question, upstairs.

'No, Miss Anne. I can't say as I've repented. Oh, no, I've never repented. Mr. Saymore is very much respected in Hunston—and there's never a day that he don't bring me something, a ribbon or a new collar, or a story book if he can't think of nothing else. It *was* a little disappointing when mother was found not to do in the kitchen. You see, Miss Anne, we want the best of cooking when strangers come, and mother, she was old-fashioned. She's never forgiven me, though it wasn't my fault. And Tommy, he was too mischievous for a waiter. We gave him a good long try, but Mr. Saymore was

obliged at last to send him away. Mother says she don't see what it's done for her, more than if I had stayed at Mount—but I'm very comfortable myself, Miss Anne,' said Keziah, with a curtsy and a tear.

'I am very glad to hear it: and I hope you'll be still happier by-and-by,' said Anne, retiring to the room which was to be hers, and which opened from the little sitting-room in which they were standing. Rose remained behind for further talk and gossip. And when all the news was told Keziah returned to her admiration of the fashion of Rose's gown.

'Are they all made like that now, in Paris? Oh, dear, I always thought when you went to France I'd go too. I always thought of Paris. But it wasn't to be.'

'You see, Keziah, you liked Saymore best,' said Rose, fixing her mischievous eyes upon Keziah's face, who smiled a little sheepish smile, and made a little half-pathetic appeal with her eyes, but did not disown the suggestion, which flattered her vanity if not her affection.

'You are as blooming as a rose, Miss—as you always was,' said Keziah, 'but what's Miss Anne been a-doing to herself? She's like a white marble image in a church; I never saw her that pale.'

'Hush!' cried Rose, in a whisper, pointing to the door behind them, by which Anne had disappeared; and then she came close to the questioner, with much pantomime and mystery. 'Don't say a word. Keziah. It is all broken off. She has thrown the gentleman over. Hush, for heaven's sake, don't say a word!'

'You don't mean it, Miss Rose. Broken off! Mr. Dou——'

Rose put her hand on the little landlady's mouth. 'She must not hear we are talking of her. She would never forgive me. And besides, I don't know—it is only a guess; but I am quite, quite sure.'

Keziah threw up her hands and her eyes. 'All broken off—thrown the gentleman over! Is there someone else?' she whispered, trembling, thinking with mingled trouble and complacency of her own experiences in this kind, and of her unquestioned superiority nowadays to the lover whom she had thrown over—the unfortunate Jim.

'No, no, no,' said Rose, making her mouth into a circle, and shaking her head. No other! No richer, better, more desirable lover! This was a thing that Keziah did not understand. Her face grew pale with wonder, even with awe. To jilt a gentleman for your own advancement in life, that might be comprehensible—but to do it to your own damage, and have cheeks like snowflakes in consequence—that was a thing she could not make out. It made her own position, with which she was already satisfied, feel twice as advantageous and comfortable; even though her marriage had not turned out so well for mother and the boys as Keziah had once hoped.

Mr. Loseby came across the street, humming a little tune, to join them at dinner. He was shining from top to toe in his newest black suit, all shining, from his little varnished shoes to his bald head, and with the lights reflected in his spectacles. It was a great day for the lawyer, who was fond of both the girls, and who had an indulgent amity, mingled with contempt, for Mrs. Mountford herself, such as men so often entertain for their friends' wives. He was triumphant in their arrival, besides, and very anxious to secure that they should return to the neighbourhood and settle among their old friends. He, too, however, after his first greetings were over, was checked in his rejoicings by the paleness of his favourite. 'What have you been doing to Anne?' were, after his salutations, the first words he said.

‘If anything has been done to her, it is her own doing,’ said Mrs. Mountford, with a little indignation.

‘Nothing has been done to me,’ said Anne, with a smile. ‘I hear that I am pale, though I don’t notice it. It is all your letters, Mr. Loseby, and the business you give me. I have to let mamma and Rose go to their dissipations by themselves.’

‘Our dissipations! You do not suppose I have had spirits for much dissipation,’ said Mrs. Mountford, now fully reminded of her position as a widow, and with her usual high sense of duty, determined to live up to it. She pressed her handkerchief upon her eyelids once more, after the fashion she had dropped. ‘But it is true that I have tried to go out a little,’ she added, ‘more than I should have done at home—for Rose’s sake.’

‘You were quite right,’ said the lawyer; ‘the young ones cannot feel as we do, they cannot be expected to go on in our groove. And Rose is blooming like her name. But I don’t like the looks of Anne. Have I been giving you so much business to do? But then, you see, I expected that you would have Mr. Douglas close at hand, to help you. Indeed, my only wonder was——’

Here Mr. Loseby broke off, and had a fit of coughing, in which the rest of the words were lost. He had surprised a little stir in the party, a furtive interchange of looks between Mrs. Mountford and Rose. And this roused the alarm of the sympathetic friend of the family, who, indeed, had wondered much—as he had begun to say—

‘No,’ said Anne, with a smile, ‘you know I was always a person of independent mind. I always liked to do my work myself. Besides, Mr. Douglas has his own occupations, and the chief part of the time we have been away.’

‘To be sure,’ said Mr. Loseby. He was much

startled by the consciousness which seemed to pervade the party, though nothing more was said. Mrs. Mountford became engrossed with her dress, which had caught in something; and Rose, though generally very determined in her curiosity, watched Anne, the spectator perceived, from under her eyelids. Mr. Loseby took no notice externally. 'That's how it always happens,' he said cheerfully; 'with the best will in the world we always find that our own business is as much as we can get through. I have found out that to my humiliation a hundred times in my life.'

'These questions about the leases are the most difficult,' said Anne, steadily. 'I suppose the old tenants are not always the best.'

'My dear, I hope in these bad times we may get tenants at all, old or new,' said the old lawyer. And then he plunged into the distresses of the country, the complaints of the farmers, the troubles of the labourers, the still greater trials of the landlord. 'Your cousin Heatheote has made I don't know how much reduction. I am not at all sure that he is right. It is a dreadfully bad precedent for other landlords. And for himself he simply can't afford it. But I cannot get him to hear reason. "What does it matter to me?" he says, "I have always enough to live on, and those that till the land have the best right to any advantage they can get out of it." What can you say to a man that thinks like that? I tell him he is a fool for his pains; but it is I who am a fool for mine, for he takes no notice though I talk myself hoarse.'

'Indeed, I think it is very unjustifiable conduct,' said Mrs. Mountford. 'He should think of those who are to come after him. A man has no right to act in that way as if he stood by himself. He ought to marry and settle down. I am sure I hope he will have heirs of his own, and not leave

the succession to that horrid little Edward. To think of a creature like that in Mount would be more than I could bear.'

'I doubt if Heathcote will ever marry; not unless he gets the one woman—— But we don't all get *that* even when we are most lucky,' said the old lawyer, briskly. 'He is crotchety, crotchety, full of his own ideas: but a fine fellow all the same.'

'Does he want to marry more than one woman?' cried Rose, opening great eyes, 'and you talk of it quite coolly, as if it was not anything very dreadful; but of course he can't, he would be hanged or something. Edward is not so bad as mamma says. He is silly; but, then, they are mostly silly.' She had begun to feel that she was a person of experience, and justified in letting loose her opinion. All this time it seemed to Mr. Loseby that Anne was going through her part like a woman on the stage. She was very quiet; but she seemed to insist with herself upon noticing everything, listening to all that was said, giving her assent or objection. In former times she had not been at all so particular, but let the others chatter with a gentle indifference to what they were saying. She seemed to attend to everything, the table, and the minutiae of the dinner, letting nothing escape her to-night.

'I think Heathcote is right,' she said; 'Edward will not live to succeed him; and, if he does not marry, why should he save money, and pinch others now, on behalf of a future that may never come? What happens if there is no heir to an entail? Could not it all be eaten up, all consumed, re-absorbed into the country, as it were, by the one who is last?'

'Nonsense, Anne. He has no right to be the last. No one has any right to be the last. To let an old family die down,' cried Mrs. Mountford, 'it is a disgrace. What would dear papa have said?'

When I remember what a life they all led me because I did not have a boy—as if it had been my fault! I am sure if all the hair off my head, or everything I cared for in my wardrobe, or anything in the world I had, could have made Rose a boy, I would have sacrificed it. I must say that if Heathcote does not marry I shall think I have been very badly used: though, indeed, his might all be girls too,’ she added, half hopefully, half distressed. ‘Anyhow, the trial ought to be made.’ Notwithstanding the danger to the estate, it would have been a little consolation to Mrs. Mountford if Heathcote on marrying had been found incapable, he also, of procuring anything more than girls from Fate.

‘When an heir of entail fails——’ Mr. Loseby began, not unwilling to expound a point on which he was an authority; but Rose broke in and interrupted him, never having had any wholesome fear of her seniors before her eyes. Rose wanted to know what was going to be done now they were here, if they were to stay all the autumn in the ‘Black Bull;’ if they were to take a house anywhere; and generally what they were to do. This gave Mr. Loseby occasion to produce his scheme. There was an old house upon the property which had not been entailed, which Mr. Mountford had bought with his first wife’s money, and which was now the inheritance of Rose. It had been suffered to fall out of repair, but it was still an inhabitable house. ‘You know it, Anne,’ the lawyer said; ‘it would be an amusement to you all to put it in order. A great deal could be done in a week or two. I am told there is no amusement like furnishing, and you might make a pretty place of it.’ The idea, however, was not taken up with very much enthusiasm.

‘In all probability,’ Mrs. Mountford said, ‘we shall go abroad again for the winter. The girls like

it, and it is very pleasant, when one can, to escape from the cold.'

The discussion of this subject filled the rest of the evening. Mr. Loseby was very anxious on his side. He declared that it did not bind them to anything; that to have a house, a *pied-à-terre*, 'even were it only to put on your cards,' was always an advantage. After much argument it was decided at last that the house at Lilford, an old Dower-house, and bearing that picturesque name, should be looked at before any conclusion was come to; and with this Mr. Loseby took his leave. Anne had taken her full share in the discussion. She had shown all the energy that her *rôle* required. She had put in suggestions of practical weight with a leaning to the Dower-house, and had even expressed a little enthusiasm about that last popular plaything—a house to furnish—which nowadays has become the pleasantest of pastimes. 'It shall be Morris-ey, but not too Morris-ey,' she had said, with a smile, still in perfect fulfilment of her *rôle*. But to see Anne playing at being Anne had a wonderful effect upon her old friend. Her stepmother and sister, being with her perpetually, did not perhaps so readily suspect the fine histrionic effort that was going on by their side. It was a fine performance; but such a performance is apt to make the enlightened beholder's heart ache. When he had taken his leave of the other ladies—early, as they were tired, or supposed it right to be tired, with their journey—Anne followed Mr. Loseby out of the room. She asked him to come into another close by. 'I have something to say to you,' she said, with a faint smile. Mr. Loseby, like the old Rector, was very fond of Anne. He had seen her grow up from her infancy. He had played with her when she was a child, and carried her sugar-plums in his coat pockets. And he had no children of his own to distract his attention from his favourite. It troubled

nim sadly to see signs of trouble about this young creature whom he loved.

‘What is it, Anne? What is it, my dear? Something has happened?’ he said.

‘No, nothing of consequence. That is not true,’ she said, hurriedly; ‘it is something, and something of consequence. I have not said anything about it to them. They suspect, that is all; and it does not matter to them; but I want to tell you. Mr. Loseby, you were talking to-night of Mr. Douglas. It is about Mr. Douglas I want to speak to you.’

He looked at her very anxiously, taking her hand into his. ‘Are you going to be married?’

Anne laughed. She was playing Anne more than ever; but, on the whole, very successfully. ‘Oh no,’ she said, ‘quite the reverse——’

‘Anne! do you mean that he has—that you have—that it is broken off?’

‘The last form is the best,’ she said. ‘It is all a little confused just yet. I can’t tell if he has, or if I have. But yes—I must do him justice: it is certainly not his doing. I am wholly responsible myself. It has come to an end.’

She looked into his face wistfully, evidently fearing what he would say, deprecating, entreating. If only nothing might be said! And Mr. Loseby was confounded. He had not been kept up like the others to the course of affairs.

‘Anne, you strike me dumb. You take away my breath. What! he whom you have sacrificed everything for: he who has cost you all you have in the world? If it is a caprice, my dear girl, it is a caprice utterly incomprehensible; a caprice I cannot understand.’

‘That is exactly how to call it,’ she said, eagerly: ‘a caprice, an unpardonable caprice. If Rose had done it, I should have whipped her, I believe; but it is I, the serious Anne, the sensible one, that have

done it. This is all there is to say. I found myself out, fortunately, before it was too late. And I wanted you to know.'

In this speech her powers almost failed her. She forgot her part. She played not Anne, but someone else, some perfectly artificial character, which her audience was not acquainted with, and Mr. Loseby was startled. He pushed away his spectacles, and contracted his brows, and looked at her with his keen, short-sighted eyes, which, when they could see anything, saw very clearly. But with all his gazing he could not make the mystery out. She faced him now, after that one little failure, with Anne's very look and tone, a slight, fugitive, somewhat tremulous smile about her mouth, her eyes wistful, deprecating blame; but always very pale: that was the worst of it, that was the thing least like herself.

'After losing,' said the lawyer slowly, 'everything you had in the world for his sake.'

'Yes,' Anne said, with desperate composure, 'it is ridiculous, is it not? Perhaps it was a little to have my own way, Mr. Loseby. Nobody can tell how subtle one's mind is till one has been tried. My father defied me, and I suppose I would not give in; I was very obstinate. It is inconceivable what a girl will do. And then we are all obstinate, we Mountfords. I have heard you say so a hundred times; pig-headed, was not that the word you used?'

'Most probably it was the word I used. Oh, yes, I know you are obstinate. Your father was like an old mule; but you, you—I declare to you I do not understand it, Anne.'

'Nor do I myself,' she said, with another small laugh, a very small laugh, for Anne's strength was going. 'Can anyone understand what another does, or even what they do themselves? But it is so; that is all that there is to say.'

Mr. Loseby walked about the room in his dis-

treass. He thrust up his spectacles till they formed two gleaming globes on the shining firmament of his baldness. Sometimes he thrust his hands behind him under his coat tails, sometimes clasped them in front of him, wringing their plump joints. 'Sacrificed everything for it,' he said, 'made yourself a beggar! and now to go and throw it all up. Oh, I can't understand it, I can't understand it! there's more in this than meets the eye.'

Anne did not speak—truth to tell, she could not—she was past all histrionic effort. She propped herself up against the arm of the sofa, close to which she was standing, and endured, there being nothing more that she could do.

'Why—why,' cried Mr. Loseby, 'child, couldn't you have known your own mind? A fine property! It was bad enough, however you chose to look at it, but at least one thought there was something to set off against the loss; now it's all loss, no compensation at all. It's enough to bring your father back from his grave. And I wish there was something that would,' said the little lawyer vehemently; 'I only wish there was something that would. Shouldn't I have that idiotical will changed as fast as pen could go to paper! Why, there's no reason for it now, there's no excuse for it. Oh, don't speak to me, I can't contain myself! I tell you what, Anne,' he cried, turning upon her, seizing one of the hands with which she was propping herself up, and wringing it in his own, 'there's one thing you can do, and only one thing, to make me forgive you all the trouble you have brought upon yourself; and that is to marry, straight off, your cousin, Heathcote Mountford, the best fellow that ever breathed.'

'I am afraid,' said Anne faintly, 'I cannot gratify you in that, Mr. Loseby.' She dropped away from him and from her support, and sank upon the first chair. Fortunately he was so much excited

himself, that he failed to give the same attention to her looks.

‘That would make up for much,’ he said; ‘that would cover a multitude of sins.’

Anne scarcely knew when he went away, but he did leave her at last seated there, not venturing to move. The room was swimming about her, dark, bare, half lighted, with its old painted walls. The prints hung upon them seemed to be moving round her, as if they were the decorations of a cabin at sea. She had got through her crisis very stoutly, without, she thought, betraying herself to anybody. She said to herself vaguely, always with a half-smile, as being her own spectator, and more or less interested in the manner in which she acquitted herself, that every spasm would probably be a little less violent, as she had heard was the case in fevers. And, on the whole, the spasm like this, which prostrated her entirely, and left her blind and dumb for a minute or two to come to herself by degrees, was less wearing than the interval of dead calm and pain that came between. This it was that took the blood from her cheeks. She sat still for a few minutes in the old-fashioned arm-chair, held up by its hard yet comforting support, with her back turned to the table and her face to the half-open door. The very meaninglessness of her position, thus reversed from all use and wont, gave a forlorn completeness to her desolation--turned away from the table, turned away from everything that was convenient and natural; her fortune given away for the sake of her love, her love sacrificed for no reason at all, the heavens and the earth all misplaced and turning round. When Anne came to herself the half-smile was still upon her lip with which she had been regarding herself, cast off on all sides, without compensation--losing everything. Fate seemed to stand opposite to her, and the world and life, in which, so far as appearance

went, she had made such shipwreck. She raised herself up a little in her chair and confronted them all. Whatever they might do, she would not be crushed, she would not be destroyed. The smile came more strongly to the curves of her mouth, losing its pitiful droop. Looking at herself again, it was ludicrous; no wonder Mr. Loseby was confounded. Ludicrous—that was the only word. To sacrifice everything for one thing: to have stood against the world, against her father, against everybody, for Cosmo: and then by-and-by to be softly detached from Cosmo, by Cosmo himself, and allowed to drift, having lost everything, having nothing. Ludicrous—that was what it was. She gave a little laugh in the pang of revival. A touch with a red-hot iron might be as good as anything to stimulate failing forces and string loose nerves. Ice does it—a plunge into an icy stream. Thus she mused, getting confused in her thoughts. In the meantime Rose and Mrs. Mountford were whispering with grave faces. ‘Is it a quarrel, or is it for good? I hope you hadn’t anything to do with it,’ said the mother, much troubled. ‘How should I have anything to do with it?’ said innocent Rose; ‘but, all the same, I am sure it is for good.’

CHAPTER XXXII.

ROSE ON HER DEFENCE.

ALL the country was stirred by the news of the return of the Mountfords, and the knowledge that they were, of all places in the world, at the ‘Black Bull’ at Hunston, which was the strangest place to go to, some people thought, though others were of opinion that Anne Mountford ‘showed her sense’ by taking the party there. It was Anne who got the credit of all the family arrangements, and sometimes without

fully deserving it. Lady Meadowlands and Fanny Woodhead, though at the opposite ends of the social scale, both concurred in the opinion that it was the best thing they could have done. Why not go back to Mount? some people said, since it was well known that the bachelor cousin had put the house at their disposal, and the furniture there still belonged to Mrs. Mountford. But how could Anne go to Mount, both these ladies asked, when it was clear as daylight that Heathcote Mountford, the new master, was as much in love with her as a man could be? Very silly of him, no doubt, and she engaged: but oh dear, oh dear, Fanny Woodhead cried, what a waste of good material that all these people should be in love with Anne! why should they all be in love with Anne, when it was clear she could not marry more than one of them? Lady Meadowlands took a higher view, as was natural, being altogether unaffected by the competition which is so hard upon unmarried ladies in the country. She said it was a thousand pities that Anne had not seen Heathcote Mountford, a very good-looking man, and one with all his wits about him, and with a great deal of conversation, before she had been carried away with the tattle of *that* Mr. Douglas, who had no looks and no family, and was only the first man (not a clergyman) whom she had ever seen. In this particular, it will be observed, her ladyship agreed with Mr. Loseby, who had so often lamented over the lateness of Heathcote's arrival on the field. All these good people ordered their carriages to drive to Hunston and call at the 'Black Bull.' The Miss Woodheads went in their little pony cart, and Lady Meadowlands in a fine London carriage, her town chariot, which was only taken out on great occasions: and the Rector was driven in by Charley very soberly in the vehicle which the younger son of the family, with all the impertinence of Oxford, profanely called

a shandrydan. With each successive visitor Anne's looks were, above all things, the most interesting subject. 'I think it suits her,' Lady Meadowlands said thoughtfully—which was a matter the others did not take into consideration. 'Don't you think so, Mr. Mountford?' she said with deliberate cruelty to Heathcote, who rode back part of the way by her carriage door. 'I am not a judge,' he said; 'I have a great deal of family feeling. I think most things suit my cousin Anne. If she were flushed and florid, most likely I should think the same.'

'And you would be perfectly right,' said the first lady in the county. 'Whatever she does, you'd have her do so ever. You and I are of the same opinion, Mr. Mountford; but if I were you I would not leave a stone unturned to get her back to Mount.' 'If will would do it!' he said. 'Will can do everything,' cried the great lady, waving her hand to him as she turned the corner. He stood still and gazed after her, shaking his head, while the beautiful bays devoured the way.

The most agitating of all these visitors to Anne were the Ashleys, who knew more about her, she felt, than all the rest put together. The Rector came in with an elaborately unconcerned countenance, paying his respects to the stepmother and commending the bloom of Rose—but, as soon as he could get an opportunity, came back to Anne and took her by the arm, as was his usual way. 'Did you send it?' he said in her ear, leading her toward the further window. It was a large broad bow-window with round sashes and old-fashioned panes, looking down the High Street of Hunston. They did not look at each other, but looked out upon the street as they stood there, the old man holding the girl close to him with his arm through hers.

'Yes—I sent it—that very day——'

‘And he sent you an answer?’

A tremor ran through Anne’s frame which the Rector was very sensible of; but he did not spare her, though he pitied her.

‘I—suppose so: there was a letter; it is all over now, if that is what you mean. Don’t talk about it any more.’

Mr. Ashley held her close by the arm, which he caressed with the pressure of his own. ‘He took it, then, quietly—he did not make any resistance?’ he said.

‘Mr. Ashley,’ said Anne, with a shiver running over her, ‘don’t let us talk of it any more.’

‘As you please, as you please, my dear,’ said the old man; but it was with reluctance that he let her go; he had a hundred questions to ask. He wanted to have satisfied himself about Cosmo, why he had done it, how he had done it, and everything about it. The Rector was confused. He remembered the letter to Cosmo, which she had given him to read, and which had bewildered him at the time by its apparent calm. And yet now she seemed to mind! he did not understand it. He wanted to hear everything about it, but she would not let him ask. His questions, which he was not permitted to give vent to, lay heavy upon his heart as he went back. ‘She would not open her mind to me,’ he said to Charley. ‘Whatever has happened, it must have been a comfort to her to open her mind. That is what is making her so pale. To shut it all up in her own heart cannot be good for her. But she would not open her mind to me.’

‘It would have been difficult to do it with all those people present,’ the Curate said, and this gave his father a little consolation. For his own part, Charley had never been so out of spirits. So long as she was happy, what did it matter? he had said so often to himself. And now she was no longer happy.

and there was nothing anyone could do to make her so. He for one had to stand by and consent to it, that Anne should suffer. To suffer himself would have been a hundred times more easy, but he could not do anything. He could not punish the man who had been at the bottom of it all. He could not even permit himself the gratification of telling that fellow what he thought of him. He must be dumb and inactive, whatever happened, for Anne's sake. While the good Rector told out his regrets and disappointment, and distress because of Anne's silence, and certainty that to open her heart would do her good, the Curate was wondering sadly over this one among the enigmas of life. He himself, and Heathcote Mountford, either of them, would have given half they had (all they had in the world, Charley put it) to be permitted to be Anne's companion and comforter through the world. But Anne did not want either of them. She wanted Cosmo, who would not risk his own comfort by taking the hand she held out to him, or sacrifice a scrap of his own life for hers. How strange it was, and yet so common—to be met with everywhere! And nobody could do anything to mend it. He scarcely ventured to allow, when he was in his parish, that there were a great many things of this kind which it was impossible to him to understand: he had to be very sure that everything that befell his poor people was 'for their good;' but in the recesses of his own bosom he allowed himself more latitude. He did not see how this, for instance, could be for anyone's good. But there is very little consolation in such a view, even less than in the other way of looking at things. And he was very 'low,' sad to the bottom of his good heart. He had not said anything to Anne. He had only ventured to press her hand, perhaps a little more warmly than usual, and he had felt, poor fellow, that for that silent sympathy she had not

been grateful. She had drawn her hand away impatiently; she had refused to meet his eye. She had not wanted any of his sympathy. Perhaps it was natural, but it was a little hard to bear.

Rose had her own grievances while all this was going on. If her sister, worked into high irritation by the questions and significant looks to which she had been exposed, had found it almost intolerable to live through the succession of visits, and to meet everybody with genial indifference, and give an account of all they had been doing, and all that they were about to do—Rose was much displeased, for her part, to find herself set down again out of the importance to which she had attained, and made into the little girl of old, the young sister, the nobody whom no one cared to notice particularly while Anne was by. It was not Rose's fault, certainly, that her father had made that will which changed the positions of herself and her sister: but Lady Meadowlands, for one, had always treated her as if it was her fault. Even that, however, was less disrespectful than the indifference of the others, who made no account of her at all, and to whom she was still little Rose, her sister's shadow—nothing at all to speak of in her own person. They did not even notice her dress, which she herself thought a masterpiece, and which was certainly such a work of art as had never been seen in Hunston before. And when all these people went away, Rose, for her part, sought Mrs. Keziah, who was always ready to admire. She was so condescending that she went downstairs to the parlour in which old Saymore and his young wife spent most of their lives, and went in for a talk. It was a thing Rose was fond of doing, to visit her humble friends and dependents in their own habitations. But there were a great many reasons why she should do what she liked in Saymore's house: first, because she was one of 'his young ladies' whom he

had taken care of all their lives; second, because she was an important member of the party who were bringing success and prosperity to Saymore's house. She was queen of all that was in the 'Black Bull.' Miss Anne might be first in Saymore's allegiance, as was the case with all the old friends of the family; but, on the other hand, Anne was not a person to skip about through the house and come in for a talk to the parlour, as Rose did lightly, with no excuse at all. 'I am so sick of all those people,' she cried; 'I wish they would not all come and be sympathetic; I don't want any one to be sympathetic! Besides, it is such a long, long time since. One must have found some way of living, some way of keeping on, since then. I wish they would not be so awfully sorry for us. I don't think now that even mamma is so sorry for herself.'

'Your mamma is a Christian, Miss Rose,' said old Saymore, getting up, though with a little reluctance, from his comfortable arm-chair as she came in. 'She knows that what can't be cured must be endured; but, at the same time, it is a great pleasure and an honour to see all the carriages of the gentry round my door. I know for certain, Miss Rose, that Lady Meadowlands never takes out that carriage for anybody below a title, which shows the opinion she has of our family. Your papa was wonderfully respected in the county. It was a great loss; a loss to everything. There is not a gentleman left like him for the trouble he used to take at Quarter Sessions and all that. It was a dreadful loss to the county, not to speak of his family. And a young man, comparatively speaking,' said Saymore, with a respectful sigh.

'Poor dear papa! I am sure I felt it as much as anyone—at the time,' said Rose; 'don't you remember, Keziah, how awful that week was? I did nothing but cry; but for a young man, Saymore,

you know that is nonsense. He was not the least young; he was as old, as old——'

Here Rose stopped and looked at him, conscious that the words she had intended to say were, perhaps, not quite such as her companions would like to hear. Keziah was sitting by, sewing. She might have taken it amiss if her young mistress had held up this new husband of hers as a Methuselah. Rose looked from one to the other, confused, yet hardly able to keep from laughing. And probably old Saymore divined what she was going to say.

'Not old, Miss Rose,' he said, with the steady pertinacity which had always been one of his characteristics; 'a gentleman in the very prime of life. When you've lived virtuous and sober, saving your presence, Miss, and never done nothing to wear yourself out, sixty is nothing but the prime of life. Young fools, as has nothing but their youth to recommend them, may say different, but from them as has a right to give an opinion, you'll never hear nothing else said. He was as healthy a man, your late dear papa, as ever I wish to see; and as hearty, and as full of life. And all his wits about him, Miss. I signed a document not longer than the very last day before he was taken—me and John Gardiner—and he was as clear as any judge, that's what he was. "It's not my will," he said to me, "Saymore—or you couldn't sign, as you're one of the legatees; for a bit of a thing like this it don't matter." I never see him more joky nor more pleasant, Miss Rose. He wasn't joky not in his ordinary, but that day he was poking his fun at you all the time. "It's a small bit of a thing to want witnessing, ain't it?" he said; "and it's not a new will, for you couldn't witness that, being both legatees."'

Rose was a good deal startled by this speech. Suddenly there came before her a vision of the sealed-up packet in Anne's desk—the seals of which

she had been so anxious to break. 'What a funny thing that he should have made you sign a paper!' she said.

'Bless you, they're always having papers to sign,' said Saymore; 'sometimes it's one thing, sometimes it's another. A deal of money is a deal of trouble, Miss Rose. You don't know that as yet, seeing as you've got Miss Anne to do everything for you.'

'I shan't always have Miss Anne,' Rose said, not knowing well what were the words she used; her mind was away, busy in other ways, very busy in other thoughts. She had always been curious, as she said to herself, from the first moment she saw that packet. What was in it? could it be the paper that Saymore signed? Could it be?—but Rose did not know what to think.

'When you have not got Miss Anne, you'll have a gentleman,' Saymore said. 'We ain't in no sort of doubt about that, Miss Rose, Keziah and me. There are ladies as always gets their gentleman, whatever happens; and one like you, cut out by nature, and a deal of money besides—there's not no question about that. The thing will be as you'll have too many to choose from. It's a deal of responsibility for a young creature at your age.'

'I will come and ask your advice, Saymore,' said Rose, her head still busy about other things. 'Keziah asked my advice, you know.'

'Did she, Miss Rose? Then I hope as you'll never repent the good advice you gave her,' said old Saymore, drawing himself up and putting out his chest, as is the manner of man when he plumes himself. Rose looked at him with eyes of supreme ridicule, and even his little wife gave a glance up from her sewing with a strong inclination to titter; but he did not perceive this, which was fortunate. Neither had Saymore any idea that the advice the young lady had given had ever been against him.

‘And you might do worse,’ he added, ‘than consult me. Servants see many a thing that other folks don’t notice. You take my word, Miss Rose, there’s nowhere that you’ll hear the truth of a gentleman’s temper and his goings on, better than in the servants’ hall.’

‘I wonder if it was a law paper that had to have two witnesses?’ said Rose, irrelevantly. ‘I wonder if it was something about the estate? Anne never has anything to sign that wants witnesses; was it a big paper, like one of Mr. Loseby’s? I should so like to know what it was.’

‘It wasn’t his will; that is all I can tell you, Miss Rose. How joky he was, to be sure, that day! I may say it was the last time as I ever saw master in life. It was before they started—him and Mr. Heathcote, for their ride. He never was better in his life than that afternoon when they started. I helped him on with his great-coat myself. He wouldn’t have his heavy coat that he always wore when he was driving. “The other one, Saymore,” he said, “the other one; I ain’t a rheumatic old fogey like you,” master said. Queer how it all comes back upon me! I think I can see him, standing as it might be there, Miss Rose, helping him on with his coat; and to think as he was carried back insensible and never opened his lips more!’

Rose was awed in spite of herself; and Keziah wiped her eyes. ‘He spoke to me that day more than he had done for ever so long,’ she said. ‘I met him in the long corridor, and I was that frightened I didn’t know what to do; but he stopped as kind as possible. “Is that you, little Keziah?” he said. “How is the mother getting on and the children?” Mother was *that* pleased when I told her. She cried, and we all cried. Oh, I don’t wonder as it is a trial to come back, losing a kind father like that and your nice ’ome!’

Now this was the kind of sympathy which Rose had particularly announced she did not wish to receive. She did not in the least regret 'her nice 'ome,' but looked back upon Mount with unfeigned relief to have escaped from the dull old world of its surroundings. But she was a little touched by these reminiscences of her father, and a great curiosity was excited within her upon other matters. She herself was a very different person from the little girl—the second daughter, altogether subject and dependent—which she had been on that fatal day. She looked back upon it with awe, but without any longing that it should be undone and everything restored to its previous order. If Mr. Mountford could come back, and everything be as before, the change would not be a comfortable one for Rose. No change, she thought, would be pleasant. What could papa mean, signing papers on that very last day? What did he want witnesses for, after his will was signed and all done? Rose did not know what to think of it. Perhaps, indeed, it was true, as old Saymore said, that gentlemen always had papers to sign; but it was odd, all the same. She went away with her head full of it upstairs to the room where her mother and sister were sitting. They were both a little languid, sitting at different ends of the room. Mrs. Mountford had been making much use of her handkerchief, and it was a little damp after so many hours. She had felt that if she were not really crying she ought to be. To see all the old people and hear so many words of welcome, and regret that things were not as they used to be, had moved her. She was seated in this subdued state, feeling that she ought to be very much affected. She felt, indeed, that she ought not to be able to eat any dinner—that she ought to be good for nothing but bed. However, it was summer, when it is more difficult to retire there. Mrs. Mountford made great use of her handkerchief.

Anne was seated in the bow-window, looking out upon the few passengers of the High Street. In reality she did not see them; but this was her outside aspect. Her book was upon her knees. She had given herself up to her own thoughts, and these, it was evident, were not over-bright. Rose's coming in was a relief to both, for, happily, Rose was not given to thinking. On most occasions she occupied herself with what was before her, and took no trouble about what might lie beneath.

'Isn't it time to dress for dinner?' Rose said.

'To be sure,' cried Mrs. Mountford gratefully. To make a movement of any kind was a good thing; 'it must be time to dress for dinner. One feels quite out here, with no bell to tell us what to do. I suppose it wouldn't do for Saymore, with other people in the house, to ring a dressing-bell. One is lost without a dressing-bell,' the good lady said. She had her work and her wools all scattered about, though in the emotion of the moment she had not been working. Now she gathered them all in her arms, and, with much content that the afternoon was over, went away.

'Do you ever have things to sign that want witnesses, Anne?'

'No,' said Anne, looking up surprised. 'Why do you ask? Sometimes a lease, or something of that sort,' she said.

'Then perhaps it was a lease,' said Rose to herself. She did not utter this audibly, or give any clue to her thoughts, except the 'Oh, nothing,' which is a girl's usual answer when she is asked what she means. And then they all went to dress for dinner, and nothing more could be said.

Nothing more was said that night. As soon as it was dusk, Mrs. Mountford retired to her room. It had been a fatiguing day, and everything had

been brought back, she said. Certainly her handkerchief was quite damp. Worth was very sympathetic as she put her mistress to bed.

‘Strangers is safest,’ Worth said; ‘I always did say so. There’s no need to keep up before them, and nothing to be pushed back upon you. Trouble is always nigh enough, without being forced back.’

And Rose, too, went to bed early. She had a great deal of her mother in her. She recognised the advantage of getting rid of herself, if not in any more pleasant way, then in that. But she could not sleep when she wished, which is quite a different thing from going to bed. She seemed to see as plainly as possible, dangling before her, with all its red seals, the packet which was to be opened on her twenty-first birthday. Why shouldn’t it be opened now? What could it matter to anyone, and especially to papa, whether it was read now or two years hence? Rose was nineteen; from nineteen is not a long step to one-and-twenty. And what if that packet contained the paper that Saymore had witnessed? She had told Anne she ought to open it. She had almost opened it herself while Anne looked on. If she only could get at it now!

Next morning a remarkable event occurred. Anne drove out with Mr. Loseby to see the Dower-house at Lilford, and report upon it. The old lawyer was very proud as she took her seat by him in his high phaeton.

‘I hope everybody will see us,’ he said. ‘I should like all the people in the county to see Queen Anne Mountford in the old solicitor’s shay. I know some young fellows that would give their ears to be me, baldness and all. Every dog has his day, and some of us have to wait till we are very old dogs before we get it.’

‘Remember, Anne,’ said Mrs. Mountford, ‘that

if it is the least damp I will have nothing to do with it.'

Rose watched from the old bow-window with the round panes to see them drive away. She waved her hand to Anne, but she was scarcely conscious what she was doing, her heart beat so much. She sent her maid out to match some ribbon, which she knew would take a long time to match, and then Rose made a general survey of the rooms. They all opened off a square vestibule, or, more correctly, an antechamber. She went through her mother's first, carelessly, as if looking for something; then through her own; and only went to Anne's as the last. Her heart beat high, but she had no feeling that she was going to do anything that was wrong. How could it be wrong? to read a letter a little earlier than the time appointed for reading it. If there had been anything to say that Rose was not to read it at all, then it might have been wrong; but what could it possibly matter whether it was read now or in two years? To be sure, it was not addressed to Rose, but what of that? Except Cosmo's letters, which of course were exceptional, being love-letters, all correspondence of the family was in common—and especially, of all things in the world, a letter from poor papa! But nevertheless Rose's heart beat as she went into Anne's room. The despatch-box generally stood by the writing-table, open, with all its contents ready for reference. The lid was shut down to-day, which gave her a great fright. But it was not locked, as she had feared. She got down on her knees before it and peeped in. There was the little drawer in which it had been placed, a drawer scarcely big enough to contain it. The red seals crackled as she took it out with trembling hands. One bit of the wax came off of itself. Had Anne been taking a peep too, though she would not permit Rose to do so? No; there was no abrasion of the paper, no

break of the seal. Rose suddenly remembered that the very seal her father had used was at this moment on her mother's desk. She got up hastily to get it, but then, remembering, took out the packet and carried it with her. She could lock the door of her own room, but not of Anne's, and it would not do to scatter scraps of the red wax about Anne's room and betray herself. She carried it away stealthily as a mouse, whisking out and in of the doors. Her cheeks were flushed, her hands trembling. Now, whatever it was, in a minute more she would know all about it. Never in her life had Rose's little being been in such a commotion. Not when her father's will was read; not when *that* gentleman at Cannes made her her first proposal; for at neither of these moments had there been any alarm in her mind for what was coming. The others might have suffered, perhaps, but not she.

Mrs. Mountford complained afterwards that she had not seen Rose all day. 'Where is Rose?' Anne asked when she came back full of the Dower-house, and anxious to recommend it to all concerned. After inquiries everywhere it was found that Rose was lying down in her room with a bad headache. She had made the maid, when she returned from her fruitless quest for the ribbon, which could not be matched, draw down the blinds: and there she lay in great state, just as Mrs. Mountford herself did in similar circumstances. Anne, who went up to see her, came down with a half-smile on her lips.

'She says it is like one of your headaches, mamma; and she will keep still till dinner.'

'That is the best thing she can do,' said Mrs. Mountford. 'If she can get a little sleep she will be all right.'

Secretly it must be allowed that Anne was more amused than alarmed by her little sister's indisposition. Mrs. Mountford had been subject to such

retirements as long as anyone could remember ; and Rose's get-up was a very careful imitation of her mother's—eau de Cologne and water on a chair beside her sofa, a wet handkerchief spread upon her head, her hair let down and streaming on the pillow.

'Don't let anyone take any notice,' she said in a faint little voice. 'If I am let alone I shall soon be better.'

'Nobody shall meddle with you,' said Anne, half laughing. And then she retired downstairs to discuss the house with Mrs. Mountford, who was only half an authority when Rose was not by.

But if anyone could have known the thoughts that were going on under the wet handkerchief and the dishevelled locks ! Rose's head was aching, not with fever, but with thinking. She had adopted this expedient to gain time, because she could not make up her mind what to do. The packet resealed, though with considerably more expenditure of wax than the original, was safely returned to the despatch-box. But Rose had been so startled by the information she had received that further action had become impossible to her. What was she to do ? She was not going to sit down under *that*, not going to submit to it, and live on for two years knowing all about it. How could she do that ? This was a drawback that she had not foreseen : information clandestinely obtained is always a dreadful burden to carry about. How was she to live for two years knowing *that*, and pretending not to know it ? Never before in her life had the current of thought run so hot in her little brain. What was she to do ? Was there nothing she could do ? She lay still for some minutes after Anne had left her. To be in such a dilemma, and not to be able to tell anybody—not to ask anybody's advice ! She thought once of rushing to Keziah, putting the case to her as of someone else. But how could Keziah tell her what to

do? At last a sudden gleam of suggestion shot through Rose's brain; she sprang half up on her sofa, forgetting the headache. At this period she was in a kind of irresponsible unmoral condition, not aware that she meant any harm, thinking only of defending herself from a danger which she had just discovered, which nobody else knew. She must defend herself. If a robber is after you in the dark, and you strike out wildly and hurt someone who is on your side, who is trying to defend you—is that your fault? Self-defence was the first thing, the only thing, that occurred to Rose. After it came into her mind in the sole way in which it was possible she took no time to think, but rushed at it, and did it without a moment's pause. She wrote a letter, composing it hurriedly, but with great care. It was not long, but it meant a great deal. It was addressed, as Anne's letter, which was also of so much importance, had been addressed, to 'Cosmo Douglas, Esq., Middle Temple.' What could little Rose be writing to Cosmo Douglas about? She slid it into her pocket when, still very much flushed and excited, she went down to dinner, and carried it about with her till quite late in the evening, when, meeting Saymore with the bag which he was about to send off to the post office, she stopped him on the stairs, and put it in with her own hand.

This was the history of Rose's day—the day when she had that feverish attack which alarmed all the inhabitants of the 'Black Bull.' She herself always said it was nothing, and happily it came to nothing. But who could prevent a mother from being alarmed, when her child suddenly appeared with cheeks so flushed, and a pulse that was positively racing, Mrs. Mountford said. However, fortunately, as the patient herself always predicted, a night's rest set it all right.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MAN OF THE PERIOD.

THERE is in human nature an injustice towards those who do wrong, those who are the sinners and agents of woe in this world, which balances a good deal of the success of wickedness. There are plenty of wicked persons who flourish like the green bay tree, and receive to all appearance no recompense for their evil ways. But, on the other hand, when a man fails to conduct himself as he ought to do, from cowardice, from an undue regard to prudential motives—from, as often happens, an overweening regard for the world's opinion—that world repays him pitilessly with contempt and neglect, and makes no allowance for all the pangs which he suffers, and for all the struggles in his soul. Cosmo Douglas has had hard measure in these pages, where, as we have pretended, his character was understood. But even in understanding it, we have dealt, we are aware and confess, hardly with this nineteenth-century man, who had done nothing more than all the canons of his age declared it his duty to do. He erred, perhaps, in loving Anne, and in telling her so at first; for he ought to have taken it into consideration that he would not be allowed to marry her, notwithstanding the bias towards the romantic side of such questions which the world professes in words. But then he was led astray by another wave of popular opinion, that which declares with much apparent reason that the race of cruel fathers is as extinct as the dodo, and that no girl is ever really prevented, if she chooses to stick to him, from marrying 'the man of her heart.' Cosmo had believed this devoutly till he was forced by events to take up a different opinion; and from that moment every impartial

observer must allow that he acted up to the highest tenets of the modern creed. As soon as he perceived that it was really likely that Anne would be deprived of her fortune in consequence of her adherence to him, he did everything a man could do, within the limits permitted to a gentleman of the period, to induce her to decide for her own advantage and against himself. He could not say in so many words, 'You must keep your fortune, and throw me over ; I shall not mind it.' But he as near said it as a person of perfectly good manners could do. It is not for a man to take the initiative in such a case, because women, always more foolish than men, are very likely to be piqued on the side of their generosity, and to hold all the more strenuously to a self-denying lover, the more he does *not* wish to bind them. In this point his position was very difficult, very delicate, as any one may perceive ; and when, in spite of all his remonstrances, and hints, and suggestions, Anne's sacrifice was accomplished, and she was actually cast off by her angry father, with no fortune, and nothing to recompense her but the attachment of a barrister without occupation, and an empty engagement to him, which it was impossible in present circumstances to carry out, it would be difficult to imagine anything more embarrassing than his position. She had made this sacrifice, which he did not wish, for him ; had insisted on making it, notwithstanding all that he could venture to say ; and now of course looked to him for gratitude, for requital, and an impassioned sense of all that she had done and relinquished for him, notwithstanding that it was the very last thing in his mind that she should relinquish anything for him. What was he to do ?

If the man was exasperated, was there much wonder ? He could no more, according to his tenets, throw her over than he could marry her. Both were

alike impossible. It was strictly according to the laws of society that a man should decline to marry when he had nothing to marry upon ; but it was not consistent with those laws (at least according to the interpretation of them accepted by men of Cosmo's type) that he should throw the lady over as soon as she had lost her fortune. Here accordingly arose a dilemma out of which it was impossible to come unharmed. Cosmo's very heart was impaled upon these forks. What could he do ? He could not marry upon nothing, and bring his wife down to the position of a household drudge, which was all, so far as he knew, that would be practicable. For Anne's sake this was out of the question. Neither could he say to her honestly, ' You are poor and I am poor, and we cannot marry.' What could he do ? He was blamed, blamed brutally, and without consideration, by most of the people round ; people like the Ashleys, for instance, who would have plunged into the situation and made something of it one way or another, and never would have found out what its characteristic difficulties were. But to Cosmo those difficulties filled up the whole horizon. What was he to do ? How was he to do it ? To plunge himself and Anne into all the horrors of a penniless marriage was impossible, simply impossible ; and to separate himself from her was equally out of the question. If the reader will contemplate the position on all sides, he will, I am sure, be brought to see that, taking into account the manner of man Cosmo was, and his circumstances, and all about him, the way in which he did behave, perplexedly keeping up his relations with her family, showing himself as useful as possible, but keeping off all too-familiar consultations, all plans and projects for the future, was really the only way open to him. He was not romantic, he was not regardless of consequences ;

being a man of his time how could he make himself so? and what else could he do?

When he received one day quite suddenly, without any preparation, that letter which Anne had given to Mr. Ashley to read, it came upon him like a thunderbolt. I cannot take upon me to say that after the first shock he was surprised by it or found it unnatural; he did not experience any of these feelings. On the contrary, it was, so far as I know, after, as has been said, the first shock, a relief to his mind. It showed him that Anne, too, had perceived the situation and accepted it. He was startled by her clear-sightedness, but it gained his approbation as the most sensible and seemly step which she could have taken. But, all the same, it hurt him acutely, and made him tingle with injured pride and shame. It does not come within the code of manhood, which is of longer existence than the nineteenth century, that a woman should have it in her power to speak so. It gave him an acute pang. It penetrated him with a sense of shame; it made him feel somehow, to the bottom of his heart, that he was an inferior kind of man, and that Anne knew it. It was all according to the canons of the situation, just as a sensible woman should have behaved; just as his own proceedings were all that a sensible man could do; but it hurt him all the same. The letter, with that calm of tone which he suspected to mean contempt, seemed to him to have been fired into him with some sharp twangling arrow: where it struck it burnt and smarted, making him small in his own esteem, petty and miserable; notwithstanding which he had to reply to it in the same spirit in which it was written—to use a phrase which was also of his time. He did this, keeping up appearances, pretending to Anne that he did not perceive the sentiments which her letter veiled, but accepted it as the

most natural thing in the world. It may be as well to give here the letter which he wrote in reply:—

‘Dearest Anne,—Your letter has indeed been a surprise to me of the most dolorous kind.

‘Yes, I understand. There is no need, as you say, for explanations—six words, or six hundred, would not be enough to say what I should have to say, if I began. But I will not. I refrain from vexing you with protestations, from troubling you with remonstrances. Circumstances are against me so heavily, so overwhelmingly, that nothing I could say would appear like anything but folly in the face of that which alone I can do. I am helpless—and you are clear-sighted, and perceive the evils of this long suspense, without allowing your clearer judgment to be flattered, as mine has been, by the foolishness of hope.

‘What then can I say? If I must, I accept your decision. This is the sole ground on which it can be put. I will not bind you against your will—that is out of the question, that is the one thing that is impossible. I will never give up hope that some change may come in the circumstances or in your resolution, till—something happens to show me that no change can come. Till then, I do not call myself your friend, for that would be folly. I am more than your friend, or I am nothing—but I will sign myself yours, as you are, without any doubt, the woman whom I will always love, and admire, and reverence, beyond any woman in the world.

‘COSMO DOUGLAS.’

And this was all quite true. He did love and admire her more than anyone in the world. It was the curse of his training that he knew what was best when he saw it, and desired that: though often men of his kind take up with the worst after, and are contented enough. But Anne was still his type of

perfection—she was beautiful to him, and sweet and delightful—but she was not possible. Is not that more than any beauty or delight? And yet, notwithstanding the acute pangs which he suffered, I don't suppose one individual out of a hundred who reads this history will be sorry for Cosmo. They will be sorry for Anne, who does not want their sorrow half so much.

He had a very melancholy time after the Mountfords went away. He had not accepted any invitations for August, being, indeed, in a very unsettled mind, and not knowing what might be required of him. He stayed in his chambers, alone with many thoughts. They were gone, and Anne had gone out of his life. It was a poor sort of life when he looked at it now, with the light of her gone, yet showing, at the point where she departed, what manner of existence it had been and was: very poor, barren, unsatisfactory—yet the only kind of life that was possible. In the solitude of these early August days he had abundance of time to think it over. He seemed to be able to take it in his hand, to look at it as a spectator might. The quintessence of life in one way, all that was best in the world made tributary to is perfection—and yet how poor a business! And though he was young, it was all he would ever come to. He was not of the stuff, he said to himself, of which great men are made. Sooner or later, no doubt, he would come to a certain success. He would get some appointment; he would have more to live upon; but this would not alter his life. If Anne had kept her fortune, that might have altered it; or if he could in any way become rich, and go after her and bring her back while still there was time. But, short of that, he saw no way to make it different. She was right enough, it was impossible; there was nothing else to be said. Yet while he arrived at this conclusion he felt within himself to the bottom

of his heart what a paltry conclusion it was. A man who was worth his salt would have acted otherwise: would have shown himself not the slave but the master of circumstances. Such men were in the backwoods, in the Australian bush, where the primitive qualities were all in all, and the graces of existence were not known. Out of the colonies, however, Cosmo believed that his own was about the best known type of man, and what he did, most men, at least in society, would have done. But he did not feel proud of himself.

The Mountfords had not been away a week when he received another letter which made his heart jump, though that organ was under very good control, and did not give him the same trouble that hearts less experienced so often give to their possessors. The post-mark, Hunston, was in itself exciting, and there was in Rose's feeble handwriting that general resemblance to her sister's which so often exists in a family. He held it in his hand and looked at it with a bewildered sense that perhaps his chances might be coming back to him, and the chapter of other life reopening. Had she relented? Was there to be a place of repentance allowed him? He held the letter in his hand, not opening it for the moment, and asking himself if it were so, whether he would be happy, or—the reverse. It had been humiliating to come to an end of the dream of brighter things, but—would it not be rather inconvenient that it should be resumed again? These were his reflections, his self-questionings, before he opened the letter. But when he did open it, and found that the letter was not from Anne but Rose Mountford, the anticlimax was such that he laughed aloud. Little Rose! he had paid her a great deal of attention, and made himself something of a slave to her little caprices, not for any particular reason, though, perhaps, with a sense that an heiress

was always a person to please, whoever she might be. What could little Rose want with him? to give him a commission—something to buy for her, or to match, or one of the nothings with which some girls have a faculty for keeping their friends employed. He began to read her letter with a smile, yet a pang all the same in the recollection that this was now the only kind of communication he was likely to have from the family. Not Anne: not those letters which had half vexed, half charmed him with their impracticable views, yet pleased his refined taste and perception of beauty. This gave him a sharp prick, even though it was with a smile that he unfolded the letter of Rose.

But when he read it he was brought to himself with a curious shock. What did it mean? Rose's letter was not occupied with any commissions, but was of the most startling character, as follows:—

‘Dear Mr. Douglas,—I am writing to you quite secretly—nobody knows anything about it—and I hope at least, whatever you do, that you will keep my secret, and not let Anne know, or mamma.

‘I feel quite sure, though nobody has said a word, that Anne and you have quarrelled—and I am so sorry; I don't know if she thought you neglected her and paid too much attention to us. I am quite sure you never meant anything by it. But what I want to say is, that I hope you won't pay attention if she is cross. *Do* make it up, and get married to Anne. You know all the money has been left to me, but if you marry, I will promise faithfully to give her a part of it, say a quarter, or even a third, which would be enough to make you comfortable. Mr. Loseby proposed this to me some time ago, and I have quite made up my mind to it now. I will give her certainly a quarter, perhaps a third, and this ought to be enough for you to marry on. I can't do

it till I come of age, but then you may be sure, *if you are married*, that I will make a new will directly and settle it so. The first thing is that you should be married, Anne and you. I wish for it very much now.

‘Be sure, above everything, that you don’t let out that I have written to you, *ever*, either to Anne or mamma.

‘Yours very truly,

‘ROSE MOUNTFORD.’

This letter filled Cosmo with consternation, with derision, with sharp irritation, yet such a sense of the absurdity, as made him laugh in the midst of all his other sentiments. For a moment the thought, the question, glanced across his mind, Could it be, however distantly, however unconsciously, inspired by Anne? But that was not to be believed: or could Mrs. Mountford, wanting perhaps to get rid of her stepdaughter’s supervision, have put this idea of intermeddling into Rose’s head? But her anxiety that her secret should be kept seemed to clear the mother; and as for Anne! That much he knew, however he might be deceived in any other way. He read it over again, with a sense of humiliation and anger which mastered his sense of the absurdity. This little frivolous plaything of a girl to interfere in his affairs! It is true, indeed, that if this assurance had been conveyed to him in a serious way, becoming its importance, say by Mr. Loseby himself, and while there was yet time to make everything comfortable, it would have been by no means an unpleasant interference to Cosmo. He could not but think what a difference it might have made if only a month back, only a fortnight back, this information had been conveyed to him. But now that it was perfectly useless, now that Anne’s letter and his own reply had entirely closed the matter between them, to have this child push in with her little im-

pertinent offer—her charity to her sister! Rose bestowing a quarter of her fortune upon Anne—the younger graciously affording a provision to the elder! By Jove! Cosmo said to himself, with an outburst of fury. Rose, a creature like Rose, to have it in her power thus to insult Anne! He was himself detached from Anne, and never more would there be any contact between them. Still it was in his power to avenge her for once in a way. Cosmo did not pause, for once in his life, to think what was prudent, but stretched out his hand for paper and ink, and immediately indited his reply:—

‘My dear little Miss Rose,—Your letter is very kind; it makes me feel as if I were a prince in a fairy tale, and you the good fairy, removing the obstacles from my way; but, unfortunately, there were not any obstacles in my way of the kind you suppose, and your present of part of your fortune to me, which seems to be what you mean, though carried out through your sister, is, I fear, a sort of thing that neither the respectable Mr. Loseby nor any other lawyer would sanction. It is very kind of you to wish to gratify me with so much money, but, alas! I cannot take it—unless, indeed, you were to give me the whole of it, along with your own pretty little hand, which I should not at all object to. Are you quite, quite sure I never “meant anything” by the attention I paid you? Perhaps I meant all the time to transfer my affections from one sister to the other, from the one without any money to the one with a fortune, which she can afford to divide into four or even three parts. Think over it again, and perhaps you will find out that this was in my mind all the time. But, short of this, I fear there is not much ground for a commercial transaction of any kind between you and me.

‘Your obedient servant to command,

‘C. DOUGLAS.’

This was the revenge he took upon Rose for her impertinence: it was mere impertinence, he supposed. Once, and once only, it crossed his mind that she might have had a motive for her anxiety that he should marry her sister. But how could that be? It was an impossibility. And notwithstanding the miserable way in which you will say he had himself behaved, his furious indignation at this patronage of Anne by Rose shows how real was still the love and better worship for Anne that was in his heart.

And when he had satisfied his temper by this letter, he sat and thought of Anne. Would it have been well with this support behind to have ventured, perhaps, and been bold, and knit their lives together? Rose's guarantee, though the offer irritated him so much, would have made that possible which at present was impossible. Would the game have been worth the candle? He sat and thought over it for a long time in the darkening evening and sighed. On the whole, perhaps, as things stood—— And then he went out to his club to dine. Not proud of himself—far from proud of himself—feeling on the whole a poor creature—and yet—— Perhaps, as things stood, it was just as well.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE HEIRESS'S TRIAL.

Rose's letter to Cosmo had been conceived in a sudden commotion of feeling, in which her instincts and sensations had come uppermost, and got almost out of her own control. That savage sense of property which exists in unreasoning childhood had risen to flame and fire within her, mingled with and made still more furious by the terror and panic of possible loss. Beneath all her gentleness and smoothness, and the

many glosses of civilisation that clothed her being, Rose had an entirely primitive nature, tenacious of every personal belonging, full of natural acquisitiveness and a love of *having*, which children and savages share with many highly cultivated persons. She was one of those who, without any conscious evil meaning, are rendered desperate by the idea of personal loss. Her first impulse, when she knew that her 'rights' were in danger, was to fight for them wildly, to turn upon all assailants with impassioned fury. She did not want to hurt anyone, but what she had got she meant to keep. The idea of losing the position to which she had been elevated, and the fortune which had made her for the last year so much more important a person than before, filled her with a kind of cruel panic or fierce terror which was ready to seize at any instrument by which its enemies could be confounded. This fierce passion of fear is apt to do more mischief than deliberate cruelty. It will launch any thunderbolt that comes to hand, arrest the very motion of the earth, if possible, and upset the whole course of mortal living. It is more unscrupulous than any tyrant. Rose was altogether possessed by this ferocious terror. When she saw her property and importance threatened, she looked about her wildly to see what machinery she could set in motion for the confusion of her enemies and her own defence. The character of it, and the result of it to others, seemed entirely unimportant to her if only it could stop the danger, forestall the approaching crisis. In the letter which she had surreptitiously read it was stipulated that in a certain case her inheritance was to be absolutely secure, and it had immediately become all-important to Rose to bring about the forbidden thing against which her father had made so violent a stand. She took her measures instantly, with the cunning of ignorance and simplicity and the cruel directness of a childish

mind. That there was some difficulty between her sister and Cosmo her quick observation had early divined. Perhaps her vanity had whispered that it was because he liked her best: but, on the other hand, Rose understood the power of pecuniary obstacles, and could feel the want of money in a much more reasonable way than her sister, though so much her superior, ever had done. And in either case her appeal to Cosmo would be sovereign, she thought, in the first heat of her panic. If he had liked her best, he would perceive that it was hopeless. If he had been afraid, because of the want of fortune, her letter would reassure him. And if she could but bring it about—make Anne unpardonable—secure her own ‘rights’!—with a passion of hostility against everybody who could injure her, this was what Rose thought.

But when the letter was fairly gone, and the machinery set in motion, a little chill crept over that first energy of passionate self-defence. Other thoughts began to steal in. The strength of the savage and of the child lies in their singleness of vision. As long as you can perceive only what you want and how it is to be had, or tried for, everything is possible; but when a cold breath steals upon you from here and there, suggesting perhaps the hurt of another whom you have really no desire to hurt, perhaps the actual wickedness which you have no desire to perpetrate, what chills come upon the heat of action, what creeping doubts even of the first headlong step already taken! Rose had three days to reflect upon what she had done, and those three days were not happy. She disguised her discomposure as much as she could, avoiding the society of her mother and sister. Anne, though she was absorbed in occupations much more important than anything that was likely to be involved in the varying looks of Rose, perceived her little sister’s flightiness and petulance with a grieved consciousness

that her position as heiress and principal personage of the family group was, now that they were in their own country and better able to realise what it meant, doing Rose harm; while Mrs. Mountford set it down to the girl's unreasonable fancy for little Keziah, whose company she seemed to seek on all occasions, and whose confidences and preparations were not the kind of things for a young girl to share.

'No good ever comes of making intimates of your servants,' her mother said, disturbed by Rose's uncertain spirits, her excitedness and agitation. What was there to be agitated about? Once or twice the girl, so wildly stirred in her own limited being, so full of ignorant desperation, boldness, and terror, and at the same time cold creepings of doubt and self-disapproval, came pressing close to her mother's side, with a kind of dumb overture of confidence. But Mrs. Mountford could not understand that there was anything to tell. If there had been a lover at hand, if Heathcote had shown his former admiration (as she understood it) for Rose, or even if he had been coming daily to visit them, she might have been curious, interested, roused to the possibility that there was a secret to tell. But what could Rose find of a nature to be confidential about in Hunston? The thing was incredible. So Mrs. Mountford had said with a little impatience, 'Can't you find a seat, my dear? I want my footstool to myself,' when the child came to her feet as girls are in the habit of doing. Rose felt herself rejected and pushed aside: and Anne's serious countenance repulsed her still more completely. It frightened her to think that she had been venturing to interfere in her sister's affairs. What would Anne say? Her panic when she thought of this was inconceivable. It was not a passion of fright like that with which her own possible loss had filled her, but it was a terror that put wings to her

feet, that gave her that impulse of instant flight and self-concealment which is the first thought of terror. Thus the poor little undeveloped nature became the plaything of desperate emotions, while yet all incapable of bearing them, and not understanding what they were. She was capable of doing deadly harm to others on one side, and almost of doing deadly harm to herself on the other, out of her extremity of fear.

Cosmo's letter, however, was as a dash of cold water in Rose's face. Its momentary effect was one of relief. He would not do what she wanted, therefore he never, never was likely to betray to Anne that she had interfered, and at the same time his refusal eased her sense of wrong-doing: but after the first momentary relief other sensations much less agreeable came into her mind. Her property! her property! Thus she stood, a prey to all the uncertainties—nay, more than this, almost sure that there was no uncertainty, that danger was over for Anne, that she herself was the victim, the deceived one, cruelly betrayed and deserted by her father, who had raised her so high only to abase her the lower—and even by Anne, who had—what had Anne done? Was it certain, Rose asked herself, that Anne had not herself privately read that fatal letter, and acted upon it, though she had pretended to be so much shocked when Rose touched it? That must have been at the bottom of it all. Yes, no doubt that was how it was; most likely it was all a plot—a conspiracy! Anne *knew*; and had put Cosmo aside—ordered him, perhaps, to pretend to like Rose best!—bound him to wait till the three years were over, and Rose despoiled, and all secure, when the whole thing would come on again, and they would marry, and cheat poor papa in his grave, and rob Rose of her fortune! She became wild with passion as this gradually rose upon her as the thing

most likely—nay, more than likely, certain! Only this could have warranted the tone in which Cosmo wrote. His letter was dreadful: it was unkind, it was mocking, it was insolent. Yes! that was the word—insolent! insulting! was what it was. Why, he pretended to propose to her!—to her! Rose! after being engaged to her sister! When Rose read it over again and perceived what even her somewhat obtuse faculties could not miss—the contemptuous mockery of Cosmo's letter, she stamped her feet with rage and despite. Her passion was too much for her. She clenched her hands tight, and cried for anger, her cheeks flaming, her little feet stamping in fury. And this was the sight which Keziah saw when she came into the room—a sight very alarming to that poor little woman; and, indeed, dangerous in the state of health in which she was.

‘Oh! Miss Rose! Miss Rose!’ she said, with a violent start (which was so bad for her); ‘what is it? what is the matter?’

Rose was in some degree brought to herself by the appearance of a spectator; and, at the same time, it was a comfort to relieve her burdened soul by speaking to someone.

‘Keziah,’ she said, in a great flush of agitation and resentment, ‘it is—it is a gentleman that has been uncivil to me!’

‘On, Miss Rose!’ old Saymore's wife cried out with excitement, attaching a much more practical meaning to the words than Rose had any insight into. ‘Oh, Miss Rose! in our house! Who is it? who is it? Only tell me, and Mr. Saymore will turn him out of doors if it was the best customer we have!’

This rapid acceptance of her complaint, and swift determination to avenge it, brought Rose still more thoroughly to herself.

‘Oh, it is not anyone here. It is a gentleman in—a letter,’ Rose said; and this subdued her. ‘It is not anything Saymore can help me about, nor you, nor anyone.’

‘We are only poor folks, Miss Rose,’ said Keziah, ‘but for a real interest, and wishing you well, there’s none, if it was the Queen herself——’

The ludicrousness of the comparison struck Rose, but struck her not mirthfully—dolefully.

‘It is not much that the Queen can care,’ she said. ‘Anne was presented, but I was never presented. Nobody cares! What was I when Anne was there? Always the little one—the one that was nobody!’

‘But, Miss Rose! Miss Rose!’

Keziah did not know how to put the consolation she wished to give, for indeed she, like everybody else, had mourned the injustice to Anne, which she must condone and accept if she adopted the first suggestion of her sympathy.

‘You know,’ she said, with a little gasp over the renegade nature of the speech—‘you know that Miss Anne is nobody now, and you are the one that everybody thinks of——’

Keziah drew her breath hard after this, and stopped short, more ashamed of her own turncoat utterance than could have been supposed: for indeed, she said to herself, with very conciliatory speciousness of reasoning, though Miss Anne was the one that everybody thought of, she herself had always thought most of Miss Rose, who was not a bit proud, but always ready to talk and tell you anything, and had liked her best.

‘Ah!’ cried Rose, shaking her head, ‘if that were always to last!’ and then she stopped herself suddenly, and looked at Keziah as if there was something to tell, as if considering whether she should

tell something. But Rose was not without prudence, and she was able to restrain herself.

‘It does not matter—it does not matter, Keziah,’ she cried, with that air of injured superiority which is always so congenial to youth. ‘There are some people who never get justice, whatever they may do.’

Little Mrs. Saymore was more bewildered than words could say. If there was a fortunate person in the world, was it not Miss Rose? So suddenly enriched, chosen, instead of Miss Anne, to have Miss Anne’s fortune, and all the world at her feet! Keziah did not know what to make of it. But Rose, who had no foolish consideration for other people’s feelings, left her little time for consideration.

‘You may go now,’ she said, with a little wave of her hand; ‘I don’t want anything. I want only to be left alone.’

‘I am sure, Miss Rose,’ said Keziah, offended, ‘I didn’t mean to intrude upon you. I wanted to say as all *the things* has come home, and if you would like to look at them, I’ve laid them all out in the best room, and they do look sweet,’ said the little, expectant mother.

Rose had taken a great deal of interest in the things, and even had aided in various small pieces of needlework—a condescension which Mrs. Mountford did not approve. But to-day she was in no mood for this inspection. She shook her head and waved her hand with a mixture of majesty and despondency.

‘Not to-day. I have other things to think of, Keziah. I couldn’t look at them to-day.’

This made Keziah take an abrupt leave, with offence which swallowed up her sympathy. Afterwards sympathy had the better of her resentment. She went and reviewed her little show by herself, and felt sorry for Miss Rose. It must be a trouble

indeed which could not be consoled by a sight of *the things*, with all their little frills goffered, and little laces so neatly ironed, laid out in sets upon the best bed.

When, however, Keziah had withdrawn, the want of anyone to speak to became intolerable to Rose. She was not used to be shut up within the limits of her own small being; and though she could keep her little secrets as well as anyone, yet the possession of this big secret, now that there was no longer anything to do—now that her initiative had failed, and produced her nothing but Cosmo's insolent letter, with its mock proposal—was more than she could contain. She dared not speak to Anne, and her mother had unwittingly repulsed her confidence. A tingling impatience took possession of her. If Keziah had been present—little as Keziah would have understood it, and unsuitable as she would have been for a *confidante*—Rose felt that she must have told her all. But even Keziah was not within her reach. She tried to settle to something, to read, to do some of her fancy-work. For a moment she thought that to 'practise'—a duty which in her emancipation she had much neglected—might soothe her; but she could only practise by going to the sitting-room where the piano was, where her mother usually sat, and where Anne most likely would be at that hour. Her book was a novel, but she could not read it. Even novels, though they are a wonderful resource in the vigils of life, lose their interest at the moments when the reader's own story is at, or approaching, a crisis. When she sat down to read, one of the phrases in Cosmo's letter would suddenly dart upon her mind like a winged insect and give her a sting: or the more serious words of the other letter—the secret of the dead which she had violated—would flit across her, till her brain could stand it no longer. She rose up with a start and fling, in a kind of

childish desperation. She could not, would not bear it! all alone in that little dark cell of herself, with no rays of light penetrating it except the most unconsolatory rays, which were not light at all, but spurts as of evil gases, and bad little savage suggestions, such as to make another raid upon Anne's despatch-box, and get the letter again and burn it, and make an end of it coming into her mind against her will. But then, even if she were so wicked as to do that, how did she know there was not another? indeed, Rose was almost sure that Anne had told her there was another—the result of which would be that she would only have the excitement of doing something very wrong without getting any good from it. She sat with her book in her hand, and went over a page or two without understanding a word. And then she jumped up and stamped her little feet and clenched her hands, and made faces in the glass at Cosmo and fate. Then, in utter impatience, feeling herself like a hunted creature, pursued by something, she knew not what, Rose seized her hat and went out, stealing softly down the stairs that nobody might see her. She said to herself that there was a bit of ribbon to buy. There are always bits of ribbon to buy for a young lady's toilette. She would save the maid the trouble and get it for herself.

The tranquil little old-fashioned High Street of a country town on an August morning is as tranquilising a place as it is possible to imagine. It was more quiet, more retired, and what Rose called dull, than the open fields. All the irregular roofs—here a high-peaked gable, there an overhanging upper story, the red pediment of the Queen Anne house which was Mr. Loseby's office and dwelling, the clustered chimneys of the almshouses—how they stood out upon the serene blueness of the sky and brilliancy of the sunshine! And underneath how

shady it was! how cool on the shady side! in what a depth of soft shelter, contrasting with the blaze on the opposite pavement, was the deep cavernous doorway of the 'Black Bull,' and the show in the shop windows, where one mild wayfarer in muslin was gazing in, making the quiet more apparent! A boy in blue, with a butcher's tray upon his head, was crossing the street; two little children in sun-bonnets were going along with a basket between them; and in the extreme distance was a costermonger's cart with fruit and vegetables, which had drawn some women to their doors. Of itself the cry of the man who was selling these provisions was not melodious, but it was so softened by the delight of the still, sweet, morning air, in which there was still a whiff of dew, that it toned down into the general harmony, adding a not unpleasant sense of common affairs, the leisurely bargain, the innocent acquisition, the daily necessary traffic which keeps homes and tables supplied. The buying and selling of the rosy-cheeked apples and green cabbages belonged to the quiet ease of living in such a softened, silent place. Rose did not enter into the sentiment of the scene; she was herself a discord in it. In noisy London she would have been more at home; and yet the quiet soothed her, though she interrupted and broke it up with the sharp pat of her high-heeled boot and the crackle of her French muslin. She was not disposed towards the limp untidy draperies that are 'the fashion.' Her dress neither swept the pavement nor was huddled up about her knees like the curtains of a shabby room, but billowed about her in crisp puffs, with enough of starch; and her footstep, which was never languid, struck the pavement more sharply than ever in the energy of her discomposure. The butcher in the vacant open shop, from which fortunately most of its contents had been removed, came out to the door bewildered

to see who it could be; and one of Mr. Loseby's clerks poked out of a window in his shirt-sleeves, but drew back again much confused and abashed when he caught the young lady's eye. The clerks in Mr. Loseby's office were not, it may be supposed, of an order to hope from any notice from a Miss Mountford of Mount; yet in the twenties both boys and girls have their delusions on that point. Rose, however, noticed the young clerk no more than if he had been a costermonger, or one of the cabbages that worthy was selling: yet the sight of him gave her a new idea. Mr. Loseby! any Mountford of Mount had a right to speak to Mr. Loseby, whatever trouble he or she might be in. And Rose knew the way into his private room as well as if she had been a child of the house. She obeyed her sudden impulse, with a great many calculations equally sudden springing up spontaneously in her bosom. It would be well to see what Mr. Loseby knew; and then he might be able to think of some way of punishing Cosmo: and then—in any case it would be a relief to her mind. The young clerk in his shirt-sleeves, yawning over his desk, heard the pat of her high heels coming up the steps at the door, and could not believe his ears. He addressed himself to his work with an earnestness which was almost solemn. Was she coming to complain of his stare at her from the window? or was it to ask Mr. Loseby, perhaps, who was that nice-looking young man in the little room close to the door?

Mr. Loseby's room was apt to look dusty in the summer, though it was in fact kept in admirable order. But the Turkey carpet was very old, and penetrated by the sweeping of generations, and the fireplace always had a tinge of ashes about it. To-day the windows were open, the Venetian blinds down, and there was a sort of green dimness in the room, in which Rose, dazzled by the sunshine out

of doors, could for the moment distinguish nothing. She was startled by Mr. Loseby's exclamation of her name. She thought for the moment that he had found her out internally as well as externally, and surprised her secret as well as herself. 'Why, little Rose!' he said. He was sitting in a coat made of yellow Indian grass-silk which did not accord so well as his usual shining blackness with the glistening of his little round bald head, and his eyes and spectacles. His table was covered with papers done up in bundles with all kinds of red tape and bands. 'This is a sight for sore eyes,' he said. 'You are like summer itself stepping into an old man's dusty den; come and sit near me and let me look at you, my summer Rose! I don't know which is the freshest and the prettiest!' said the old lawyer, waving his hand towards a beautiful luxurious blossom of 'La France' which was on his table in a Venetian glass. He had a fancy for pretty things.

'Oh, I was passing, and I thought I would come in—and see you,' Rose said.

Mr. Loseby had taken her appearance very quietly, as a matter of course; but when she began to explain he was startled. He pushed his spectacles up upon his forehead and looked at her curiously. 'Ah!' he said, 'that was kind of you—to come with no other object than to see an old man.'

'Oh!' cried Rose, confused, 'I did not say I had no other object, Mr. Loseby. I want you to tell me—is—is—Anne likely to settle upon the Dower-house? I do so want to know.'

'My dear child, your mother has as much to do with it as Anne has. You will hear from her better than from me.'

'To be sure, that is true,' said Rose; and then, after a pause, 'Oh, Mr. Loseby, is it really, really

true that Cosmo Douglas is not going to marry Anne? isn't it shameful? to bring her into such trouble and then to forsake her. Couldn't he be made to marry her? I think it is a horrid shame that a man should behave like that and get no punishment at all.'

Mr. Loseby pushed his spectacles higher and higher; he peered at her through the partial light with a very close scrutiny. Then he rose and half drew up one of the blinds. But even this did not satisfy him. 'Do you think then,' he said at last, 'that it would be a punishment to a man to marry Anne?'

'It would depend upon what his feelings were, said Rose with much force of reason; 'if he wanted, for example, to marry—somebody else.'

'Say Rose—instead of Anne,' said the acute old lawyer, with a grin which was very much like a grimace.

'I am sure I never said that!' cried Rose. 'I never, never said it, nor so much as hinted at it. He may say what he pleases, but *I* never, never said it! you always thought the worst of me, Mr. Loseby, Anne was always your favourite; but you need not be unjust. Haven't I come here expressly to ask you? Couldn't he be made to marry her? Why, they were engaged! everybody has talked of them as engaged. And if it is broken off, think how awkward for Anne.'

Mr. Loseby took off his spectacles, which had been twinkling and glittering upon his forehead like a second pair of eyes—this was a very strong step, denoting unusual excitement—and wiped them deliberately while he looked at Rose. He had the idea, which was not a just idea, that either Rose had been exercising her fascinations upon her sister's lover, or that she had been in her turn fascinated by him. 'You saw a good deal of Mr. Douglas in

town?' he said, looking at her keenly, always polishing his spectacles; but Rose sustained the gaze without shrinking.

'Oh, a great deal,' she said; 'he went everywhere with us. He was very nice to mamma and me. Still I do not care a bit about him if he behaves badly to Anne; but he ought not to be let off—he ought to be made to marry her. I told him—what I was quite ready to do——'

'And what are you quite ready to do, if one might know?' Mr. Loseby was savage. His grin at her was full of malice and all uncharitableness.

'Oh, you know very well!' cried Rose, 'it was you first who said—— Will you tell me one thing, Mr. Loseby,' she ran on, her countenance changing; 'what does it mean by the will of 1868?'

'What does what mean?' The old lawyer was roused instantly. It was not that he divined anything, but his quick instinct forestalled suspicion, and there suddenly gleamed over him a consciousness that there was something to divine.

'Oh!—I mean,' said Rose, correcting herself quickly, 'what is meant by the will of 1868? I think I ought to know.'

Mr. Loseby eyed her more and more closely. 'I wonder,' he said, 'how you know that there was a will of 1868?'

But there was nothing in his aspect to put Rose on her guard. 'I think I ought to know,' she said, 'but I am always treated like a child. And if things were to turn round again, and everything to go back, and me never to have any good of it, I wonder what would be the use at all of having made any change?'

Mr. Loseby put on his spectacles again. He wore a still more familiar aspect when he had his two spare eyes pushed up from his forehead, ready for use at a moment's notice. He was on the verge

of a discovery, but he did not know as yet what that discovery would be.

‘That is very true,’ he said; ‘and it shows a great deal of sense on your part: for if everything were to turn round it would certainly be no use at all to have made any change. The will of 1868 is the will that was made directly after your father married for the second time; it was made to secure her mother’s fortune to your sister Anne.’

‘Without even the least thought of me!’ cried Rose, indignant.

‘It was before you were born,’ said Mr. Loseby, with a laugh that exasperated her.

‘Oh!’ she cried, with an access of that fury which had frightened Keziah, ‘how horrible people are! how unkind things are! how odious it is to be set up and set down and never know what you are, or what is going to happen! Did I do anything to Cosmo Douglas to make him break off with Anne? is it my fault that he is not going to marry her after all? and yet it will be me that will suffer, and nobody else at all. Mr. Loseby, can’t it be put a stop to? I know you like Anne best, but why should not I have justice, though I am not Anne? Oh, it is too bad! it is cruel—it is wicked! Only just because papa was cross and out of temper, and another man is changeable, why should I be the one to suffer? Mr. Loseby, I am sure if you were to try you could change it; you could stop us from going back to this will of 1868 that was made before I was born. If it was only to burn that bit of paper, that horrid letter, that thing! I had nearly put it into the fire myself. Oh!’ Rose wound up with a little cry: she came suddenly to herself out of her passion and indignation, and shrank away, as it were, into a corner, and confronted the old lawyer with a pale and troubled countenance like a child found out. What had she done? She had betrayed

herself. She looked at him alarmed, abashed, in a sudden panic which was cold, not hot with passion, like her previous one. What could he cause to be done to her? What commotion and exposure might he make? She scarcely dared to lift her eyes to his face; but yet would not lose sight of him lest something might escape her which he should do.

‘Rose,’ he said, with a tone of great severity, yet a sort of chuckle behind it which gave her consolation, ‘you have got hold of your father’s letter to Anne.’

‘Well,’ she said, trembling but defiant, ‘it had to be read some time, Mr. Loseby. It was only about us two; why should we wait so many years to know what was in it? A letter from papa! Of course we wanted to know what it said.’

‘*We!* Does Anne know too?’ he cried, horrified. And it gleamed across Rose’s mind for one moment that to join Anne with herself would be to diminish her own criminality. But after a moment she relinquished this idea, which was not tenable. ‘Oh, please!’ she cried, ‘don’t let Anne know! She would not let me touch it. But why shouldn’t we touch it? It was not a stranger that wrote it—it was our own father. Of course I wanted to know what he said.’

There was a ludicrous struggle on Mr. Loseby’s face. He wanted to be severe, and he wanted to laugh. He was disgusted with Rose, yet very lenient to the little pretty child he had known all his life, and his heart was dancing with satisfaction at the good news thus betrayed to him. ‘I have got a duplicate of it in my drawer, and it may not be of much use when all is said. Since you have broken your father’s confidence, and violated his last wishes, and laid yourself open to all sorts of penalties, you—may as well tell me all about it,’ he said.

When Rose emerged into the street after this interview, she came down the steps straight upon Willie Ashley, who was mooning by, not looking whither he was going, and in a somewhat disconsolate mood. He had been calling upon Mrs. Mountford, but Rose had not been visible. Willie knew it was 'no use' making a fool of himself, as he said, about Rose; but yet when he was within reach he could not keep his feet from wandering where she was. When he thus came in her way accidentally, his glum countenance lighted up into a blaze of pleasure. 'Oh, here you are!' he cried in a delighted voice. 'I've been to Saymore's and seen your mother, but you were not in.' This narrative of so self-evident a fact made Rose laugh, though there were tears of agitation and trouble on her face, which made Willie conclude that old Loseby (confound him!) had been scolding her for something. But when Rose laughed all was well.

'Of course I was not in. It is so tiresome there—nothing to do, nowhere to go. I can't think why Anne wishes to keep us here of all places in the world.'

'But you are coming to the Dower-house at Lilford? Oh! say you are coming, Rose. I know some people that would dance for joy.'

'What people? I don't believe anybody cares where we live,' said Rose with demure consciousness, walking along by his side with her eyes cast down, but a smile hovering about the corners of her mouth. Confession had been of use to her, and had relieved her soul, even though Mr. Loseby had no power to confer absolution.

'Don't we? Well, there's Charley for one; he has never had a word to throw to a dog since you went away. Though a fellow may know it is no good, it's always something to know that you're there.'

‘What is no good?’ said Rose, with extreme innocence. And thus the two went back talking—of matters very important and amusing—through the coolness and sweetness and leisure of the little country street. Anne, who was seated in the bow-window of the sitting-room with her books and her papers, could not help breathing forth a little sigh as she looked out and saw them approaching, so young and so like each other. What a pity!’ she said to herself. So far as she herself was concerned, it was far more than a pity; but even for Rose——.

‘What is a pity?’ said Mrs. Mountford: and she came and looked out over Anne’s shoulder, being a little concerned about her child’s absence. When she saw the pair advancing she flushed all over with annoyance and impatience. ‘Pity! it must be put a stop to,’ she cried; ‘Willie Ashley was always out of the question; a boy with next to nothing. But now it is not to be thought of for a moment. I rely upon you, if you have any regard for your sister, to put a stop to it, Anne!’

CHAPTER XXXV.

A SIMPLE WOMAN.

THE Dower-house at Lilford was fixed upon shortly after by general consent. It was an old house, but showed its original fabric chiefly in the tall stacks of chimneys which guaranteed its hospitable hearths from smoke, and gave an architectural distinction to the pile of building, the walls of which were all matted in honeysuckles, roses, and every climbing plant that can be imagined, embroidering themselves upon the background of the ivy, which filled every crevice. And the pleasure of furnishing, upon which Mr. Loseby had been cunning enough to enlarge, as an inducement to the ladies to take possession of

this old dwelling-place, proved as great and as delightful as he had represented it to be. It was a pleasure which none of the three had ever as yet experienced. Even Mrs. Mountford had never known the satisfaction, almost greater than that of dressing one's self—the delight and amusement of dressing one's house and making it beautiful. She had been taken as a bride to the same furniture which had answered for her predecessor; and though in the course of the last twenty years something had no doubt been renewed, there is no such gratification in a new carpet or curtains, which must be chosen either to suit the previous furniture, or of those homely tints which, according to the usual formula of the shops, 'would look well with anything,' as in the blessed task of renovating a whole room at once. They had everything to do here, new papers (bliss! for you may be sure Mrs. Mountford was too fashionable to consult anybody but Mr. Morris on this important subject), and a whole array of new old furniture. They did not transfer the things that had been left at Mount, which would have been, Mrs. Mountford felt, the right thing to do, but merely selected a few articles from the mass which nobody cared for. The result, they all flattered themselves, was fine. Not a trace of newness appeared in all the carefully decorated rooms. A simulated suspicion of dirt, a ghost of possible dust, was conjured up by the painter's skill to make everything perfect—not in the way of a vulgar copy of that precious element which softens down the too perfect freshness, but, by a skilful touch of art, reversing the old principle of economy, and making 'the new things look as weel's the auld.' This process, with all its delicate difficulties, did the Mountford family good in every way. To Anne it was the most salutary and health-giving discipline. It gave her scope for the exercise of all those secondary tastes and fancies.

which keep the bigger and more primitive sentiments in balance. To be anxious about the harmony of the new curtains, or concerned about the carpet, is sometimes salvation in its way; and there were so many questions to decide—things for beauty and things for use—the character of every room, and the meaning of it, which are things that have to be studied nowadays before we come so far down as to consider the conveniences of it, what you are to sit upon, or lie upon, though these two are questions almost of life and death. Anne was plunged into the midst of all these questions. Besides her serious business in the management of the estate which Mr. Loseby had taken care should occupy her more and more, there were a hundred trivial play-anxieties always waiting for her, ready to fill up every crevice of thought. She had, indeed, no time to think. The heart which had been so deeply wounded, which had been compelled to give up its ideal and drop one by one the illusions it had cherished, seemed pushed into a corner by this flood of occupation. Anne's mind, indeed, was in a condition of exhaustion, something similar to that which sometimes deadens the sensations of mourners after a death which in anticipation has seemed to involve the loss of all things. When all is over, and the tortures of imagination are no longer added to those of reality, a kind of calm steals over the wounded soul. The worst has happened; the blow has fallen. In this fact there is quiet at least involved, and now the sufferer has nothing to think of but how to bear his pain. The wild rallying of all his forces to meet a catastrophe to come is no longer necessary. It is over; and though the calm may be but 'a calm despair,' yet it is different from the anguish of looking forward. And in Anne's case there was an additional relief. For a long time past she had been forcing upon herself a fictitious satisfaction. The first delight of her love, which she

had described to Rose as the power of saying everything to her lover, pouring out her whole heart in the fullest confidence that everything would interest him and all be understood, had long ago begun to ebb away from her. As time went on, she had fallen upon the pitiful expedient of writing to Cosmo without sending her letters, thus beguiling herself by the separation of an ideal Cosmo, always the same, always true and tender, from the actual Cosmo whose attention often flagged, and who sometimes thought the things that occupied her trivial, and her way of regarding them foolish or high-flown. Yes, Cosmo too had come to think her high-flown: he had been impatient even of her fidelity to himself; and gradually it had come about that Anne's communications with him were but carefully prepared abridgments of the genuine letters which were addressed to—someone whom she had lost, someone, she could not tell who, on whom her heart could repose, but who was not, so far as she knew, upon this unresponsive earth. All this strain, this dual life, was over now. No attempt to reconcile the one with the other was necessary. It was all over; the worst had happened; there was no painful scene to look forward to, no gradual loosening of a tie once so dear; but whatever was to happen had happened. How she might have felt the blank, had no such crowd of occupations come in to fill up her time and thoughts, is another question. But, as it was, Anne had no time to think of the blank. In the exhaustion of the revolution accomplished she was seized hold upon by all these crowding occupations, her thoughts forced into new channels, her every moment busy. No soul comes through such a crisis without much anguish and many struggles, but Anne had little time to indulge herself. She had to stand to her arms, as it were, night and day. She explained her position to Mr. Loseby, as has been said, and

she informed her stepmother briefly of the change : but to no one else did she say a word.

‘There was silence in heaven for the space of half an hour.’ Could any word express more impressively the pause of fate, the quiet of patience and deliberation over the great and terrible things to come. There was silence in the heaven of Anne’s being. She forbore to think, forbore to speak, even to herself. All was still within her. The firmament had closed in around her. Her world was lessened, so much cut off on every side, a small world now with no far-shining distances, no long gleams of celestial light, nothing but the little round about her, the circle of family details, the work of every day. Instead of the wide sky and the infinite air, to have your soul concentrated within a circle of Mr. Morris’s papers, however admirable they may be, makes a great difference in life. Sometimes she even triumphed over circumstances so far as to see the humorous side of her own fate, and to calculate with a smile half pathetic, all that her unreasonable fidelity had cost her. It had cost her her father’s approbation, her fortune, her place in life, and oh ! strange turning of the tables ! it had cost her at the same time the lover whom she had chosen, in high youthful absolutism and idealism, at the sacrifice of everything else. Was there ever a stranger contradiction, completion, of a transaction ? He for whom she had given up all else, was lost to her because she had given everything for him. A woman might weep her heart out over such a fate, or she might smile as Anne smiled, pale, with a woful merriment, a tremulous pathetic scorn, an indignation half lost in that sentiment which made Othello cry out, ‘The pity of it ! The pity of it !’ Oh, the pity of it ! that such things should be ; that a woman should give so much for so little—and a man return so little for so much. Sometimes, when she was by herself, this smile would come up unawares,

a scarcely perceptible gleam upon her pale countenance. 'What are you smiling at, Anne?' her step-mother or Rose would ask her as she sat at work. 'Was I smiling? I did not know—at nobody—I myself,' she would say, quoting Desdemona this time. Or she would remind herself of a less dignified simile—of poor Dick Swiveller, shutting up one street after another, in which he had made purchases which he could not pay for. She had shut up a great many pleasant paths for herself. Her heart got sick of the usual innocent romance in which the hero is all nobleness and generosity, and the heroine all sweet dependence and faith. She grew sick of poetry and all her youthful fancies. Even places became hateful to her, became as paths shut up. To see the Beeches even from the road gave her a pang. Mount, where she had written volumes all full of her heart and inmost thoughts to Cosmo, pained her to go back to, though she had to do it occasionally. And she could not think of big London itself without a sinking of the heart. He was there. It was the scene of her disenchantment, her disappointment. All these were as so many slices cut off from her life. Rose's estate, and the leases, and the tenants, and the patronage of Lilford parish, which belonged to it, and all its responsibilities, and the old women, with their tea and flannels, and the Dower-house with Mr. Morris's papers—these circumscribed and bound in her life.

But there was one person at least whose affectionate care of her gave Anne an amusement which now and then found expression in a flood of tears: though tears were a luxury which she did not permit herself. This was the Rector, who was always coming and going, and who would walk round Anne at the writing-table, where she spent so much of her time, with anxious looks and many little signs of perturbation. He did not say a great deal to her,

but watched her through all the other conversations that would arise, making now and then a vague little remark, which was specially intended for her, as she was aware, and which would strike into her like an arrow, yet make her smile all the same. When there was talk of the second marriage of Lord Meadowlands' brother, the clergyman, Mr. Ashley was strong in his defence. 'No one can be more opposed than I am to inconstancies of all kinds; but when you have made a mistake the first time it is a wise thing and a right thing,' said the good Rector, with a glance at Anne, 'to take advantage of the release given you by Providence. Charles Meadows had made a great mistake at first—like many others.' And then, when the conversation changed, and the Woodheads became the subject of discussion, even in the fulness of his approbation of 'that excellent girl Fanny,' Mr. Ashley found means to insinuate his constant burden of prophecy. 'What I fear is that she will get a little narrow as the years go on. How can a woman help that who has no opening out in her life, who is always at the first chapter?'

'Dear me, Rector,' said Mrs. Mountford, 'I did not know you were such an advocate of marriage.'

'Yes, I am a great advocate of marriage: without it we all get narrow. We want new interests to carry on our life; we want to expand in our children, and widen out instead of closing in.'

'But Fanny has not closed in,' said Anne, with a half malicious smile, which had a quiver of pain in it: for she knew his meaning almost better than he himself did.

'No, no, Fanny is an excellent girl. She is everything that can be desired. But you must marry, Anne, you must marry,' he said, in a lower tone, coming round to the back of her chair. There was doubt and alarm in his eyes. He saw in her that terror of single-minded men, an old maid. Women

have greatly got over the fear of that term of reproach. But men who presumably know their own value best; and take more deeply to heart the loss to every woman of their own sweet society, have a great horror of it. And Anne seemed just the sort of person who would not marry, having been once disgusted and disappointed, Mr. Ashley concluded within himself, with much alarm. He was even so far carried away by his feelings as to burst forth upon his excellent son and Curate, one evening in the late autumn, when they were returning together from the Dower-house. They had been walking along for some time in silence upon the dusty, silent road, faintly lighted by some prevision of a coming moon, though she was not visible. Perhaps the same thoughts were in both their minds, and this mutual sympathy warmed the elder to an overflow of the pent-up feeling. 'Man alive!' he cried out suddenly, turning upon Charley with a kind of ferocity, which startled the Curate as much as if a pistol had been presented at him. 'Man alive! can't *you* go in for her? you're better than nothing if you're not very much. What is the good of you, if you can't try, at least *try*, to please her? She's sick of us all, and not much wonder; but, bless my soul, you're young, and why can't you make an effort? why can't you try? that's what I would like to know,' the Rector cried.

Charley was taken entirely by surprise. He gasped in his agitation, 'I—*try*? But she would not look at me. What have I to offer her?' he said, with a groan.

Upon which the Rector repeated that ungracious formula. 'You may not be very much, but you're better than nothing. No,' the father said, shaking his head regretfully, 'we are none of us very much to look at; but, Lord bless my soul, think of Anne, *Anne*, settling down as a single woman: an old maid!' he cried, with almost a shriek of dismay. The

two men were both quite subdued, broken down by the thought. They could not help feeling in their hearts that to be anybody's wife would be better than that.

But when they had gone on for about half an hour, and the moon had risen silvery over the roofs of the cottages, showing against the sky the familiar and beloved spire of their own village church, Charley, who had said nothing all the time, suddenly found a voice. He said, in his deep and troubled bass, as if his father had spoken one minute ago instead of half an hour, 'Heathcote Mountford is far more likely to do something with her than I.'

'Do you think so?' cried the Rector, who had not been, any more than his son, distracted from the subject, and was as unconscious as Charley was of the long pause. 'She does not know him as she knows you.'

'That is just the thing,' said the Curate, with a sigh. 'She has known me all her life, and why should she think any more about me? I am just Charley, that is all, a kind of a brother: but Mountford is a stranger. He is a clever fellow, cleverer than I am: and, even if he were not,' said poor Charley, with a tinge of bitterness, 'he is new, and what he says sounds better, for they have not heard it so often before. And then he is older, and has been all about the world; and besides—well,' the Curate broke off with a harsh little laugh, 'that is about all, sir. He is he, and I am me—that's all.'

'If that is what you think,' said the Rector, who had listened to all this with very attentive ears, pausing, as he took hold of the upper bar of his own gate, and raising a very serious countenance to his son, 'if this is really what you think, Charley—you may have better means of judging—we must push Mountford. Anything would be better,' he said, solemnly, 'than to see Anne an old maid. And she's capable of

doing that,' he added, laying his hand upon his son's in the seriousness of the moment. 'She is capable of doing it, if we don't mind.'

Charley felt the old hand chill him like something icy and cold. And he did not go in with his father, but took a pensive turn round the garden in the moonlight. No, she would never walk with him there. It was too presumptuous a thought. Never would Anne be the mistress within, never would it be permitted to Charley to call her forth into the moonlight in the sweet domestic sanctity of home. His heart stirred within him for a moment, then sank, acknowledging the impossibility. He breathed forth a vast sigh as he lit the evening cigar, which his father did not like him to smoke in his presence, disliking the smell, like the old-fashioned person he was. The Curate walked round and round the grass-plats, sadly enjoying this gentle indulgence. When he tossed the end away, after nearly an hour of silent musing, he said to himself, 'Mountford might do it,' with another sigh. It was hard upon Charley. A stranger had a better chance than himself, a man that was nothing to her, whom she had known for a few months only. But so it was: and it was noble of him that he wished Mountford no manner of harm.

This was the state of affairs between the Rectory and the Dower-house, which, fortunately, was on the very edge of Lilford parish, and therefore could, without any searchings of heart on the part of the new Vicar there, permit the attendance of the ladies at the church which they loved. When Willie was home at Christmas his feet wore a distinct line on the road. He was always there, which his brother thought foolish and weak, since nothing could ever come of it. Indeed, if anything did exasperate the Curate, it was the inordinate presumption and foolishness of Willie, who seemed really to believe that

Rose would have something to say to him. *Rose!* who was the rich one of the house, and whose eyes were not magnanimous to observe humble merit like those of her sister. It was setting that little thing up, Charley felt, with hot indignation, as if she were superior to Anne. But then Willie was always more complacent, and thought better of himself than did his humble-minded brother. As for Mr. Ashley himself, he never intermitted his anxious watch upon Anne. She was capable of it. No doubt she was just the very person to do it. The Rector could not deny that she had provocation. If a woman had behaved to him like that, he himself, he felt, might have turned his back upon the sex, and refused to permit himself to become the father of Charley and Willie. That was putting the case in a practical point of view. The Rector felt a cold dew burst out upon his forehead, when it gleamed across him with all the force of a revelation, that in such a case Charley and Willie might never have been. He set out on the spot to bring this tremendous thought before Anne, but stopped short and came back after a moment depressed and toned down. How could he point out to Anne the horrible chance that perhaps two such paragons yet unborn might owe their non-existence (it was difficult to put it into words even) to her? He could not say it; and thus lost out of shyness or inaptness, he felt (for why should there have been any difficulty in stating it?), by far the best argument that had yet occurred to him. But though he relinquished his argument he did not get over his anxiety. Anne an old maid! it was a thought to move heaven and earth.

In the meantime Heathcote Mountford felt as warmly as anyone could have desired the wonderful brightening of the local horizon which followed upon the ladies' return. The Dower-house was for him also within the limits of a walk, and the decoration and

furnishing which went on to a great extent after they had taken possession, the family bivouacking pleasantly in the meantime, accepting inconveniences with a composure which only ladies are capable of under such circumstances, gave opportunity for many a consultation and discussion. It was no obsequious purpose of pleasing her which made Heathcote almost invariably agree with Anne when questions arose. They were of a similar mould, born under the same star, to speak poetically, with a natural direction of their thoughts and fancies in the same channel, and an agreement of tastes perhaps slightly owing to the mysterious affinities of the powerful and wide-spreading family character which they both shared. By-and-by it came to be recognised that Anne and Heathcote were each other's natural allies. One of them even, no one could remember which, playfully identified a certain line of ideas as 'our side.' When the winter came on and country pleasures shrank as they are apt to do, to women, within much restricted limits, the friendship between these two elder members of the family grew. That they were naturally on the same level, and indeed about the same age, nobody entertained any doubt, aided by that curious foregone conclusion in the general mind (which is either a mighty compliment or a contemptuous insult to a woman) that a girl of twenty-one is in reality quite the equal and contemporary, so to speak, of a man of thirty-five. Perhaps the assumption was more legitimate than usual in the case of these two; for Anne, always a girl of eager intelligence and indiscriminate intellectual appetite, had lived much of her life among books, and was used to unbounded intercourse with the matured minds of great writers, besides having had the ripening touch of practical work, and of that strange bewildering conflict with difficulties unforeseen which is called disenchantment by some, disappointment by others, but which is

perhaps to a noble mind the most certain and un-failing of all maturing influences. Heathcote Mountford had not lived so much longer in the world without having known what that experience was, and in her gropings darkly after the lost ideal, the lost paradise which had seemed so certain and evident at her first onset, Anne began to feel that now and then she encountered her kinsman's hand in the darkness with a reassuring grasp. This consciousness came to her slowly, she could scarcely tell how; and whether he himself was conscious of it at all she did not know. But let nobody think this was in the way of lovemaking or overtures to a new union. When a girl like Anne, a young woman full of fresh hope and confidence and all belief in the good and true, meets on her outset into life with such a 'disappointment' as people call it, it is not alone the loss of her lover that moves her. She has lost her world as well. Her feet stumble upon the dark mountains; the steadfast sky swims round her in a confusion of bewildering vapours and sickening giddy lights. She stands astonished in the midst of a universe going to pieces, like Hamlet in those times which were out of joint. All that was so clear to her has become dim. If she has a great courage, she fights her way through the blinding mists, not knowing where she is going, feeling only a dull necessity to keep upright, to hold fast to something. And if by times a hand reaches hers thrust out into the darkness, guiding to this side or that, her fingers close upon it with an instinct of self-preservation. This, I suppose, is what used to be called catching a heart in the rebound. Heathcote himself was not thinking of catching this heart in its rebound. He was not himself aware when he helped her; but he was dimly conscious of the pilgrimage she was making out of the gloom back into the light.

This was going on all the winter through. Mr.

Morris's papers, and all the harmonies or discordances of the furniture, and the struggle against too much of Queen Anne, and the attempts to make some compromise that could bear the name of Queen Victoria, afforded a dim amusement, a background of trivial fact and reality which it was good to be able always to make out among the mists. Love may perish, but the willow-pattern remains. The foundation of the world may be shaken, but so long as the dado is steady! Anne had humour enough to take the good of all these helps, to smile, and then laugh, at all the dimly comic elements around her, from the tremendous seriousness of the decorator, up to the distress and perplexity of the Rector and his alarmed perception of the possible old maid in her. Anne herself was not in the least alarmed by the title which made Mr. Ashley shiver. The idea of going over all that course of enchantment once again was impossible. It had been enchantment once—a second time it would be—what would a second time be? impossible! That was all that could be said. It was over for her, as certainly as life of this kind is over for a widow. To be sure it is not always over even for a widow: but Anne, highly fantastical as became her temper and her years, rejected with a lofty disdain any idea of renewal. Nevertheless, towards the spring, after the darkness had begun to lighten a little, when she found at a hard corner that metaphorical hand of Heathcote taking hers, helping her across a bad bit of the road, her heart was conscious of a throb of pleasure.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LAST.

Rose's behaviour had been a trouble and a puzzle to her family during the latter part of the year. Whether it was that the change from the dissipation of London and the variety of their wanderings 'abroad' to the dead quiet of country life, in which the young heiress became again little Rose and nothing more, was a change beyond the powers of endurance, or whether it was some new spring of life in her, nobody could tell. She became fretful and uncertain in temper, cross to her mother, and absolutely rebellious against Anne, to whom she spoke in a way which even Mrs. Mountford was moved to declare 'very unbecoming.'

'You ought to remember that Anne is your elder sister, at least, whatever else,' the mother said, who had always been a little aggrieved by the fact that, even in making her poor, her father had given to Anne a position of such authority in the house.

'Mamma!' Rose had cried, flushed and furious, 'she may manage my property, but she shall not manage *me*.'

The little girl talked a great deal about her property in those days, except when Mr. Loseby was present, who was the only person, her mother said, who seemed to exercise any control over her. By-and-by, however, this disturbed condition of mind calmed down. She gave Willie Ashley a great deal of 'encouragement' during the Christmas holidays; then turned round upon him at Easter, and scarcely knew him. But this was Rose's way, and nobody minded very much. In short, the Curate was cruelly consoled by his brother's misadventure. It is a sad confession to have to make; but, good Christian as

he was, Charley Ashley felt better when he found that Willie had tumbled down from confidence to despair.

‘I told you you were a fool all the time,’ he said, with that fraternal frankness which is common among brothers; and he felt it less hard afterwards to endure the entire abandonment in his own person of any sort of hope.

And thus the time went on. Routine reasserted those inalienable rights which are more potent than anything else on earth, and everybody yielded to them. The Mountfords, like the rest, owned that salutary bondage. They half forgot the things that had happened to them—Anne her disenchantments, Rose her discovery, and Mrs. Mountford that life had ever differed much from its present aspect. All things pass away except dinner-time and bed-time, the day’s business, and the servants’ meals.

But when the third year was nearly completed from Mr. Mountford’s death, the agitation of past times began to return again. Rose’s temper began to give more trouble than ever, and Mr. Loseby’s visits were more frequent, and even Anne showed a disturbance of mind unusual to her. She explained this to her kinsman Heathcote one autumn afternoon, a few days before Rose’s birthday. He had asked the party to go and see the last batch of the cottages, which had been completed—a compliment which went to Anne’s heart—according to her plans. But Heathcote had stopped to point out some special features to his cousin, and these two came along some way after the others. The afternoon was soft and balmy, though it was late in the year. The trees stood out in great tufts of yellow and crimson against the sky, which had begun to emulate their hues. The paths were strewed, as for a religious procession, with leaves of russet and gold, and the

low sun threw level lights over the slopes of the park, which were pathetically green with the wet and damp of approaching winter.

‘The season is all stillness and completion,’ Anne said; ‘but I am restless. I don’t know what is the matter with me. I want to be in motion—to do something—from morning to night.’

‘You have had too much of the monotony of our quiet life.’

‘No; you forget I have always been used to the country; it is not monotonous to me. Indeed, I know well enough what it is,’ said Anne, with a smile. ‘It is Rose’s birthday coming so near. I will lose my occupation, which I am fond of—and what shall I do?’

‘I could tell you some things to do.’

‘Oh, no doubt I shall find something,’ said Anne, with heightened colour. ‘I cannot find out from Rose what she intends. It must be a curious sensation for a little girl who—has never been anything but a little girl—to come into such a responsibility all at once.’

‘But you were no older than she—when you came into—’ said Heathcote, watching her countenance—‘all this responsibility, and other things as well.’

‘I was older, a great deal, when I was born,’ said Anne, with a laugh. ‘It is so different—even to be the eldest makes a difference. I think I shall ask Rose to keep me on as land-agent. She must have someone.’

‘On your own property; on the land which your mother brought into the family; on what would have been yours but for——’

‘Hu-ush!’ said Anne, with a prolonged soft utterance, lifting her hand as if to put it on his mouth; and, with a smile, ‘never say anything of that—it is over—it is all over. I don’t mind it now; I am

rather glad,' she said resolutely. 'if it must be faced, and we must talk of it—rather glad that it is for nothing that I have paid the price: without any compensation. I dare say it is unreasonable, but I don't think there is any bitterness in my mind. Don't bring it up——.'

'I will not—God forbid!' he said, 'bring bitterness to your sweetness—not for anything in the world, Anne; but think, now you are free from your three years' work, now your time will be your own, your hands empty——'

'Think! why that is what I am thinking all day long: and I don't like it. I will ask Rose to appoint me her land-agent.'

'I will appoint you mine,' he said. 'Anne, we have been coming to this moment all these three years. Don't send me away without thinking it over again. Do you remember all that long time ago how I complained that I had been forestalled; that I had not been given a chance? And for two years I have not dared to say a word. But see the change in my life. I have given up all I used to care for. I have thought of nothing but Mount and you—you and Mount. It does not matter which name comes first; it means one thing. Now that you are free, it is not Rose's land-agent but mine that you ought to be. I am not your love,' he said, a deep colour rising over his face, 'but you are mine, Anne. And, though it sounds blasphemy to say so, love is not everything; life is something; and there is plenty for us to do—together.'

His voice broke off, full of emotion, and for a moment or two she could not command hers. Then she said, with a tremor in her tone—'Heathcote—you are poor and I am poor. Two poverties together will not do the old place much good'

'Is that all you know, Anne—still? They will make the old place holy; they will make it

the beginning of better things to come. But if it is not possible still to sacrifice those other thoughts—I can wait, dear,’ he said, hurriedly, ‘I can wait.’

Then there was a little pause, full of fate. After a time she answered him clearly, steadily. ‘There is no question of sacrifice: but wait a little, Heathcote, wait still a little.’ Then she said with something that tried to be a laugh, ‘You are like the Rector; you are frightened lest I should be an old maid.’

And then in his agitation he uttered a cry of alarm as genuine as the Rector’s, but more practical. ‘That you shall not be!’ he cried suddenly, grasping her arm in both his hands. Anne did not know whether to be amused or offended. But after awhile they went on quietly together talking, if not of love, yet of what Heathcote called life—which perhaps was not so very different in the sense in which the word was at present employed.

Two days after was Rose’s birthday. Mr. Loseby came over in great state from Hunston, and the friends of the family were all gathered early, the Ashleys and Heathcote coming to luncheon, with Fanny Woodhead and her sister, while a great party was to assemble in the evening. Rose herself, oddly enough, had resisted this party, and done everything she could against it, which her mother had set down to simple perversity, with much reason on her side. ‘Of course we must have a party,’ Mrs. Mountford said. ‘Could anything be more ridiculous? A coming of age and no rejoicing! We should have had a party under any circumstances, even if you had not been so important a person.’ Rose cried when the invitations were sent out. There were traces of tears and a feverish agitation about her as the days went on. Two or three times she was found in close conversation with Mr. Loseby, and once or

twice he had the look of urging something upon her which she resisted. Mrs. Mountford thought she knew all about this. It was no doubt his constant appeal about the provision to be made for Anne. This was a point upon which the sentiments of Rose's mother had undergone several changes. At one time she had been very willing that a division of the property should take place, not, perhaps, a quite equal division, but sufficiently so to content the world, and give everybody the impression that Rose 'had behaved very handsomely!' but at another time it had appeared to her that to settle upon Anne the five hundred a year which had been her allowance as the guardian of her sister's interests, would be a very sufficient provision. She had, as she said, kept herself aloof from these discussions latterly, declaring that she would not influence her daughter's mind—that Rose must decide for herself. And this, no doubt, was the subject upon which Mr. Loseby dwelt with so much insistence. Mrs. Mountford did not hesitate to say that she had no patience with him. 'I suppose it is always the same subject,' she said. 'My darling child, I won't interfere. You must consult your own heart, which will be your best guide. I might be biassed, and I have made up my mind not to interfere.' Rose was excited and impatient, and would scarcely listen to her mother. 'I wish nobody would interfere,' she cried; 'I wish they would leave us alone, and let us settle it our own way.'

At last the all-important day arrived. The bells were rung in the little church at Lilford very early, and woke Rose with a sound of congratulation, to a day which was as bright as her life, full of sunshine and freshness, the sky all blue and shining, the country gay with its autumn robes, every tree in a holiday dress. Presents poured in upon her on all sides. All her friends, far and near, had remem-

bered, even those who were out of the way, too far off to be invited for the evening festivities, what a great day it was in Rose's life. But she herself did not present the same peaceful and brilliant aspect. Mrs. Worth had not this time been successful about her dress. She was in a flutter of many ribbons as happened to be the fashion of the moment, and her round and blooming face was full of agitation, quite uncongenial to its character. There were lines of anxiety in her soft forehead, and a hot feverish flush upon her cheeks. When the Ashleys arrived they were called into the library where the family had assembled—a large sunny room filled at one end with a great bow-window, opening upon the lawn, which was the favourite morning-room of the family. At the upper end, at the big writing-table which was generally Anne's throne of serious occupation, both the sisters were seated with Mr. Loseby and his blue bag. Mr. Loseby had been going over his accounts, and Anne had brought her big books, while Rose between them, like a poor little boat bobbing up and down helplessly on this troubled sea of business, gave an agitated attention to all they said to her. Mrs. Mountford sat at the nearest window with her worsted work, as usual counting her stitches, and doing her best to look calm and at her ease, though there was a throb of anxiety which she did not understand in her mind, for what was there to be anxious about? The strangers felt themselves out of place at this serious moment, all except the old Rector, whose interest was so strong and genuine that he went up quite naturally to the table, and drew his chair towards it, as if he had a right to know all about it. Heathcote Mountford stood against the wall, near Mrs. Mountford, and made a solemn remark to her now and then about nothing at all, while Charley and Willie stood about against the light in the bow-window, mentally leaning against

each other, and wishing themselves a hundred miles away.

The group at the table was a peculiar one : little Rose in the centre, restless, uneasy, a flush on her face, clasping and unclasping her hands, turning helplessly from one to the other : Mr. Loseby's shining bald head stooped over the papers, its polished crown turned towards the company as he ran on in an unbroken stream of explanation and instruction, while Anne on the other side, serene and fair, sat listening with far more attention than her sister. Anne had never looked so much herself since all these troubles arose. Her countenance was tranquil and shining as the day. She had on (the Curate thought) the very same dress of white cashmere, easy and graceful in its long sweeping folds, which she wore at Lady Meadowlands' party ; but as that was three years ago, I need not say the gown was not identically the same. A great quietness was in Anne's mind. She was pleased, for one thing, with the approbation she had received. Mr. Loseby had declared that her books were kept as no clerk in his office could have kept them. Perhaps this was exaggerated praise, and bookkeeping is not an heroic gift, but yet the approbation pleased her. And she had executed her father's trust. Whatever might be the next step in her career, this, at least, was well ended, and peace was in her face and her heart. She made a little sign of salutation to Charley and Willie as they came in, smiling at them with the ease that befitted their fraternal relations. A soft repose was about her. Her time of probation, her lonely work, was over. Was there now, perhaps, a brighter epoch, a happier life to begin ?

But Rose was neither happy nor serene ; her hot hands kept on a perpetual manœuvring, her face grew more and more painfully red, her ribbons fluttered with the nervous trembling in her—now

and then the light seemed to fail from her eyes. She could scarcely contain herself while Mr. Loseby's voice went on. Rose scarcely knew what she wanted or wished. Straight in front of her lay the packet directed in her father's hand to Mr. Loseby, the contents of which she knew, but nobody else knew. Fifty times over she was on the point of covering it with her sleeve, slipping it into her pocket. What was the use of going on with all this farce of making over her fortune to her, if *that* was to be produced at the end? or was it possible, perhaps, that it was not to be produced? that this nightmare, which had oppressed her all the time, had meant nothing after all? Rose was gradually growing beyond her own control. The room went round and round with her; she saw the figures surrounding her darkly, scarcely knowing who they were. Mr. Loseby's voice running on seemed like an iron screw going through and through her head. If she waited a moment longer everything would be over. She clutched at Anne's arm for something to hold fast by—her hour had come.

They were all roused up in a moment by the interruption of some unusual sound, and suddenly Rose was heard speaking in tones which were sharp and urgent in confused passion. 'I don't want to hear any more,' she said; 'what is the use of it all? Oh, Mr. Loseby, please be quiet for one moment and let me speak! The first thing is to make a new will.

'To make your will—there is plenty of time for that,' said the old lawyer, astonished, pushing his spectacles as usual out of his way; while Mrs. Mountford said with a glance up from her worsted-work, 'My pet! that is not work for to-day.'

'Not my will—but papa's!' she cried. 'Mr. Loseby, you know; you have always said I must change the will. Anne is to have the half—I settled

it long ago. We are to put it all right. I want Anne to have the half—or nearly the half!’ she cried, with momentary hesitation, ‘before it is too late. Put it all down, and I will sign; the half, or as near the half as—— Quick! I want it all to be settled before it is too late!’

What did she mean by too late? Anne put her arm behind her sister to support her, and kissed her with trembling lips. ‘My Rosie!’ she cried, ‘my little sister!’ with tears brimming over. Mrs. Mountford threw down all her wools and rushed to her child’s side. They all drew close, thinking that ‘too late’ could only mean some fatal impression on the girl’s mind that she was going to die.

‘Yes, half: half is a great deal!’ said Rose, stammering, ‘nearly half, you know—I have always meant it. Why should I have all and she none? And she has not married Mr. Douglas—I don’t know why. I think—but it hasn’t come about—I want everybody to know, papa made a mistake; but I give it to her, *I give it to her!* Mr. Loseby, make a new will, and say that half—or nearly half—is to be for Anne. And oh! please, no more business—that will do for to-day.’

She got up and sat down as she was speaking, feverishly. She shook off her mother’s hand on her shoulder, gave up her hold upon Anne, drew her hand out of the Rector’s, who had clasped it, bidding God bless her, with tears running down his old cheeks. She scarcely even submitted to the pressure of Anne’s arm, which was round her, and did not seem to understand when her sister spoke. ‘Rose!’ Anne was saying, making an appeal to all the bystanders, ‘Do you know what she says? She is giving me everything back. Do you hear her—the child! My little Rosie! I don’t care—I don’t care for the money; but it is everything that she is giving me. What a heart she has! do you hear,

do you all hear?—everything!’ Anne’s voice of surprise and generous joy went to all their hearts.

Mrs. Mountford made an effort to draw Rose towards herself. ‘There had better be no exaggeration—she said the half—and it is a great thing to do,’ said the mother thoughtfully. There was nothing to be said against it; still half was a great deal, and even Rose, though almost wild with excitement, felt this too.

‘Yes, half—I did not mean all, as Anne seems to think; half is—a great deal! Mr. Loseby, write it all down and I will sign it. Isn’t that enough—enough for to-day?’

‘Only one thing else,’ Mr. Loseby said. He put out his hand and took up the letter that was lying innocently among the other papers. ‘This letter,’ he said—but he was not allowed to go any further. Rose turned upon him all feverish and excited, and tore it out of his hands. ‘Anne!’ she cried, with a gasp, ‘Anne! I can’t hear any more to-day.’

‘No more, no more,’ said Anne, soothingly; ‘what do we want more, Mr. Loseby? She is quite right. If you were to secure the crown to me, you could not make me more happy. My little Rose! I am richer than the Queen!’ Anne cried, her voice breaking. But then, to the astonishment of everybody, Rose burst from her, threw down the letter on the table, and covered her face, with a cry shrill and sharp as if called forth by bodily pain.

‘You can read it, if you please,’ the girl cried; ‘but if you read it, I will die!’

Mr. Loseby looked at Anne and she at him. Something passed between them in that look, which the others did not understand. A sudden flush of colour covered her face. She said softly ‘My trust is not over yet. What can it matter to anyone but

ourselves what is in the letter? We have had business enough for one day.'

And Rose did not appear at lunch. She had been overwrought, everybody said. She lay down in a dark room all the afternoon with a great deal of eau de Cologne about, and her mother sitting by. Mrs. Mountford believed in bed, and the pulling down of the blinds. It was a very strange day: after the luncheon, at which the queen of the feast was absent, and no one knew what to say, the familiar guests walked about the grounds for a little, not knowing what to think, and then judiciously took themselves away till the evening, while Mr. Loseby disappeared with Anne, and Mrs. Mountford soothed her daughter. In the evening Rose appeared in a very pretty dress, though with pale cheeks. Anne, who was far more serious now than she had been in the morning, kissed her little sister tenderly, but they did not say anything to each other. Neither from that time to this has the subject ever been mentioned by one to the other. The money was divided exactly between them, and Anne gave no explanations even to her most intimate friends. Whether it was Rose who shared with her, or she with Rose, nobody knew. The news stole out, and for a little while everybody celebrated Rose to the echo; but then another whisper got abroad, and no one knew what to think. As a matter of fact, however, Mr. Mountford's two daughters divided everything he left behind. The only indication Anne ever received that the facts of the case had oozed out beyond the circle of the family, was in the following strange letter, which she received some time after, when her approaching marriage to Heathcote Mountford, of Mount, was made known:—

'You will be surprised to receive a letter from me. Perhaps it is an impertinence on my part to write.

But I will never forget the past, though I may take it for granted that you have done so. Your father's letter, which I hear was read on your sister's birthday, will explain many things to you and, perhaps, myself among the many. I do not pretend that I was aware of it, but I may say that I divined it; and divining it, what but one thing in the face of all misconstructions, remained for me to do? Perhaps you will understand me and do me a little justice now. Pardon me, at least, for having troubled even so small a portion of your life. I try to rejoice that it has been but a small portion. In mine you stand where you always did. The altar may be veiled and the worshipper say his litanies unheard. He is a nonjuror, and his rites are licensed by no authority, civil or sacred: nor can he sing mass for any new king. Yet in darkness and silence and humiliation, for your welfare, happiness, and prosperity does ever pray—C. D.'

Anne was moved by this letter more than it deserved, and wondered if, perhaps——? But it did not shake her happiness as, possibly, it was intended to do.

And then followed one of the most remarkable events in this story. Rose, who had always been more or less worldly-minded, and who would never have hesitated to say that to better yourself was the most legitimate object in life—Rose—no longer a great heiress, but a little person with a very good fortune, and quite capable of making what she, herself, would have called a good marriage—Rose married Willie Ashley, to the astonishment and consternation of everybody. Mrs. Mountford, though she lives with them and is on the whole fond of her son-in-law, has not even yet got over her surprise. And as for the old Rector, it did more than surprise, it bewildered him. A shade of alarm comes over his countenance still, when he speaks of it. 'I

had nothing to do with it,' he is always ready to say. With the Curate the feeling is still deeper and more sombre. In the depths of his heart he cannot forgive his brother. That Rose should have been the one to appreciate modest merit and give it its reward, Rose and not her sister—seems like blasphemy to Charley. Nevertheless, there are hopes that Lucy Woodhead, who is growing up a very nice girl, and prettier than her sister, may induce even the faithful Curate to change the current of his thoughts and ways.

THE END.

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